THE 1980 ANNUAL WORLD'S BEST SF

EDITED BY DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

THE 1980 ANNUAL WORLD'S BEST SF

EDITED BY DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

This year, Donald A. Wollheim has chosen 11 outstanding stories for his annual anthology of the best short science fiction—visions of the future... visions of Utopia... visions of ordinary human beings in extraordinary situations. For example:

Options by John Varley. Cleo was a very happy woman. She loved her husband, her children, her job. She had no complaints about being female, no sexual dissatisfactions—yet the Sunday Supplement article on sex changing started her thinking.

The idea had never interested her before, and she knew that her husband was against it. But one afternoon, while wandering through the city's medical district, Cleo stepped into the New Heredity Body Salon on impulse.

The handsome young consultant was most helpful. He stood her in front of a computerized full-length mirror for a simple demonstration of what could be accomplished. And

(continued on back flap)

BOOK CLUB EDITION

(continued from front flap)

Cleo liked what she saw. She could always revert later, after all—the Change didn't have to be permanent—and there were so many intriguing possibilities....

The Thaw by Tanith Lee. Carla Brice meant nothing to her descendant Tacey. But Carla was one of 70 people who, back in 1993, had been victims of terminal diseases, and had opted to undergo cryogenic suspension.

Now, some 200 years later, smack in the middle of the future those people had expected so much from, Carla was going to be defrosted—and the Institute had asked Tacey to help her great-great-great-great-great-grandmother to adjust.

Tacey wasn't keen on the idea at first, but the situation seemed harmless enough...a good deal all around, Tacey thought.

But she was mistaken.

The Thirteenth Utopia by Somtow Sucharitkul. The Inquestor was proud of his record; he was truly a master iconoclast, a purger of planets, a transformer of societies. "Every Utopia has its flaw" was his motto, and he had proved it repeatedly throughout his career...intended to prove it again on the planet Shtoma.

First he would impress the inhabitants with the Lie—that their world was being considered for the honor of being named a human sanctuary. Then he would begin his search for their "ideal" society's fatal flaw.

But the Inquestor was in for a surprise, because there was one tiny fact of life on Shtoma he knew nothing about. Well, actually, it wasn't a *tiny* fact at all....

Also included—stories by *George R. R. Martin, Larry Niven and Steve Barnes, Ted Reynolds and others.*

Jacket painting by
Gary Viskupic

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

3997

The 1980 Annual World's Best SF

The 1980
Annual World's Best
SF

THE 1980 ANNUAL WORLD'S BEST SF

EDITED BY

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

with Arthur W. Saha

DAW BOOKS, INC.

DONALD A. WOLLHEIM, Publisher

Copyright ©, 1980, by Donald A. Wollheim

All Rights Reserved.

DAW TRADEMARK REGISTERED
U.S. PAT. OFF. MARCA
REGISTRADA. HECHO EN U.S.A.

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION *The Editor* vii

THE WAY OF CROSS AND DRAGON *George R. R. Martin* 1
Copyright ©, 1979, by Omni International Ltd. By permission of the author and Kirby McCauley Ltd.

THE THIRTEENTH UTOPIA *Somtow Sucharitkul* 20
Copyright ©, 1979, by Condé Nast Publications Inc. By permission of the author and Adele Leone Agency.

OPTIONS *John Varley* 43
Copyright ©, 1979, by Terry Carr. From *Universe 9*, by permission of Kirby McCauley Ltd.

UNACCOMPANIED SONATA *Orson Scott Card* 73
Copyright ©, 1979, by Omni International Ltd. By permission of the author.

THE STORY WRITER *Richard Wilson* 92
Copyright ©, 1979, by Richard Wilson. From *Destinies*. By permission of the author.

DAISY, IN THE SUN *Connie Willis* 136
Copyright ©, 1979, by Connie Willis. From *Galileo* Magazine, by permission of *Galileo* Magazine and the author.

THE LOCUSTS *Larry Niven and Steve Barnes* 155
Copyright ©, 1979, by Condé Nast Publications, Inc. By permission of the authors.

THE THAW *Tanith Lee* 196
Copyright ©, 1979, by Davis Publications, Inc. By permission of the author.

OUT THERE WHERE THE BIG SHIPS GO *Richard Cowper* 217
Copyright ©, 1979, by Mercury Press, Inc. By permission of the author's agents, Curtis Brown, Ltd. and A. P. Watt, Ltd.

CAN THESE BONES LIVE? *Ted Reynolds* 246
Copyright ©, 1979, by Condé Nast Publications, Inc. By permission of the author.

THE EXTRAORDINARY VOYAGES OF AMÉLIE BERTRAND *Joanna Russ* 266
Copyright ©, 1979, by Mercury Press, Inc. By permission of the author.

INTRODUCTION

Recently we spent an evening with a well-known science fiction writer and his wife whose hobby is world travel. Present also were another couple with the same itching foot, and the evening was spent listening to reminiscences of their visits to the most remote and exotic places on the surface of this planet, including some rarely visited clusters of islands in the Indian Ocean. At one point we ventured to ask why, having seen dozens of primitive communities, they still wanted to see more.

We were pounced upon with the assertion that, while these communities may be poor and primitive, each had its own quaint customs and unique forms of art. Well, we have given this a lot of thought, inquiring of ourselves why we lacked the compulsion to visit with wide eyes communities of semi-paupers in no-plumbing comfortless homes, lacking vision of the world beyond their village boundaries, condemned to relatively short lives, scant medicine (if any), illiteracy, monotonous diets, and unchanging futures.

Yes, we accept that the superstructures of these societies are different. After all, these people are *homo sapiens,* with brains as good as any, and they have imaginations, and each community has created a mental, religious and social superstructure to its own concepts, limited though their horizons may be. But the basics, the elemental facts of life that put food into their stomachs and clothes (if any) on their backs, are the same essentially the world over.

You could pluck a family from any of thousands of small illiterate villages in Asia, Africa, Oceanica, or Latin America, and switch it with a similar family half a world away, and in a few weeks, once the family mastered the few hundred words that constitute the effective working language of these communities, and got the hang of the changed date for market day, and the nature

of the crop that would have to be scratched out of the small plot of ground, they would soon be right at home, indistinguishable from the rest of the village. Because the basics of primitive day-to-day existence are all the same: simple, hard, poorly rewarded, stultifying to the imagination and to ambition, ignorant, and sufficient only for subsistence and a life expectancy of about thirty-five years.

This is the way it was for all humanity for hundreds of generations in the past. Things were even simpler and rougher when humanity was back in the hunter-gatherer stage which preceded agriculture. There must have been thousands of virtually unchanging generations in which our ancestors thought that was all there could be to life. Just about two jumps above the beasts and that was it. The superstructures which made the difference were the by-products of an oversized brain which imagined that which it could not explain.

But everything changed in the past five thousand years for some communities. In the past one thousand years things changed even more. And during the past hundred and fifty years life for some changed to a startling degree. What happened was the creation and the flowering of the high technology, high energy society that has become the way of life today in some parts of the world —North America, Western Europe, Japan, and here and there in large urban centers elsewhere.

Now we are at a crisis point, a transitional phase of human society. To maintain this high technology culture we need energy, we need education, we need a maximum display of human ingenuity. To fail is to drop slowly backward to the level of our primitive ancestors. Our horizons today are infinite, stretching to the unseen boundaries of the entire cosmos. Our imagination, based on the progress of scientific investigation and technological innovation can logically conjecture lives of luxury, health, and happiness such as could never have been projected before—and these visions are capable of achievement for future generations if . . .

. . . if the sources of energy do not run out too soon . . . if research in science does not dry up . . . if young people do not become entrapped by the apologetics for poverty which emanate from the old ignorant writings and the primitive heritage we all still share.

Energy, if it is not to be limited to the finite supplies of oil and coal (and they are *finite*), must be solar and nuclear. The problem of how to harness these forces must be solved within the limited time bounded by the existing reserves of the old fuels—or else it is back to the mud huts for all time to come.

Nothing in nature—or the universe—stands still. If you do not go forward, you must go backward.

The safest means of obtaining both forms of energy is via the solar power accumulator satellite. Research and development have been done on these but thus far they have not been brought to the public's attention nor received the political backing necessary. Oil is occupying the world too much. But these power-source satellites will come—they are inevitable and will include the use of the lunar surface for nuclear plants—and they represent the guarantee of high technology living for all humanity for the indefinite future. They also mean that space flight is an absolute necessity if this is to be achieved.

So science fiction readers have a stake in space flight (as they have always had) that means more than just adventures on exotic planets or sightseeing among the stars. It is either space or back to the jungle.

A lecture of this sort may seem out of place in an anthology of the year's best science fiction but it is not. Because science fiction does reflect the advanced conjectures of the superstructure of a high technology society. This previous year's stories reflect very much the deep controversy that is beginning to sink into the consciousness of civilized people everywhere.

No, these stories do not deal with oil prices and allotments of energy. That is not the function of science fiction. One of the aspects of this high technology derived literature is concern with humanity as it may develop in that new era, with humanity as it confronts space and the infinite, with humanity as it adjusts, sometimes painfully, to a future that is not limited to the cabbage patch and the village shaman.

Utopianism is a strong part of science fiction's heritage, but utopias must be tempered with understanding of human nature—and human nature is violent, argumentative, fallible, and given to endless fantasizing.

Going over the novelettes and short stories of the year we were struck with this transition-period philosophical concern. Will we

break away from the deeply entrenched heritage of our millions-years ancestry? If so, how? How will men reconcile the philosophies of today with the conditions of a vast tomorrow?

It was a fertile year for assessments of what is likely to come. There are some very provocative stories here, calculated to make you weigh the values of today. So here they are, our pick of the ten best and most memorable stories of the previous year—plus one extra for a very special reason that you will learn when you come to it.

—DONALD A. WOLLHEIM

THE WAY OF CROSS AND DRAGON

by George R. R. Martin

The orthodoxies of all established churches have two contradictory things in common. First, at any specific time they believe that they represent the final and absolute word on the Creator and the Duties of Man. Second, they invariably keep shifting their interpretation of their doctrines to conform with the constantly altering conditions and politics of men. George R. R. Martin, who has shown a very perceptive understanding of anthropology and its permutations, projects this paradox onto the screen of a populated galaxy.

"Heresy," he told me. The brackish waters of his pool sloshed gently.

"Another one?" I said wearily. "There are so many these days."

My Lord Commander was displeased by that comment. He shifted position heavily, sending ripples up and down the pool. One broke over the side, and a sheet of water slid across the tiles of the receiving chamber. My boots were soaked yet again. I accepted that philosophically. I had worn my worst boots, well aware that wet feet were among the inescapable consequences of paying call on Torgathon Nine-Klariis Tûn, elder of the ka-Thane

people, and also Archbishop of Vess, Most Holy Father of the Four Vows, Grand Inquisitor of the Order Militant of the Knights of Jesus Christ, and counselor to His Holiness Pope Daryn XXI of New Rome.

"Be there as many heresies as stars in the sky, each single one is no less dangerous, Father," the archbishop said solemnly. "As Knights of Christ, it is our ordained task to fight them one and all. And I must add that this new heresy is particularly foul."

"Yes, my Lord Commander," I replied. "I did not intend to make light of it. You have my apologies. The mission to Finnegan was most taxing. I had hoped to ask you for a leave of absence from my duties. I need rest, a time for thought and restoration."

"Rest?" The archbishop moved again in his pool, only a slight shift of his immense bulk, but it was enough to send a fresh sheet of water across the floor. His black, pupilless eyes blinked at me. "No, Father, I am afraid that is out of the question. Your skills and your experience are vital for this new mission." His bass tones seemed to soften somewhat then. "I have not had time to go over your reports on Finnegan," he said. "How did your work go?"

"Badly," I told him, "though ultimately I think we will prevail. The Church is strong on Finnegan. When our attempts at reconciliation were rebuffed, I put some standards into the right hands, and we were able to shut down the heretics' newspaper and broadcasting facilities. Our friends also made certain that their legal actions came to nothing."

"That is not *badly,*" the archbishop said. "You won a considerable victory for the Lord and the Church."

"There were riots, my Lord Commander," I said. "More than a hundred of the heretics were killed, and a dozen of our own people. I fear there will be more violence before the matter is finished. Our priests are attacked if they so much as enter the city where the heresy has taken root. Their leaders risk their lives if they leave that city. I had hoped to avoid such hatreds, such bloodshed."

"Commendable, but not realistic," said Archbishop Torgathon. He blinked at me again, and I remembered that among people of his race blinking is a sign of impatience. "The blood of martyrs must sometimes be spilled, and the blood of heretics as well.

What matters it if a being surrenders his life, so long as his soul is saved?"

"Indeed," I agreed. Despite his impatience, Torgathon would lecture me for another hour if given a chance. That prospect dismayed me. The receiving chamber was not designed for human comfort, and I did not wish to remain any longer than necessary. The walls were damp and moldy, the air hot and humid and thick with the rancid-butter smell characteristic of the ka-Thane. My collar was chafing my neck raw. I was sweating beneath my cassock, my feet were thoroughly soaked, and my stomach was beginning to churn.

I pushed ahead to the business at hand. "You say this new heresy is unusually foul, my Lord Commander?"

"It is," he said.

"Where has it started?"

"On Arion, a world some three weeks' distance from Vess. A human world entirely. I cannot understand why you humans are so easily corrupted. Once a ka-Thane has found the faith, he would scarcely abandon it."

"That is well known," I replied politely. I did not mention that the number of ka-Thane to find the faith was vanishingly small. They were a slow, ponderous people, and most of their vast millions showed no interest in learning any ways other than their own, or following any creed but their own ancient religion. Torgathon Nine-Klariis Tûn was an anomaly. He had been among the first converts almost two centuries ago, when Pope Vidas L had ruled that nonhumans might serve as clergy. Given his great life span and the iron certainty of his belief, it was no wonder that Torgathon had risen as far as he had, despite the fact that fewer than a thousand of his race had followed him into the Church. He had at least a century of life remaining to him. No doubt he would someday be Torgathon Cardinal Tûn, should he squelch enough heresies. The times are like that.

"We have little influence on Arion," the archbishop was saying. His arms moved as he spoke, four ponderous clubs of mottled green-gray flesh churning the water, and the dirty white cilia around his breathing hole trembled with each word. "A few priests, a few churches, some believers, but no power to speak of. The heretics already outnumber us on this world. I rely on your intellect, your shrewdness. Turn this calamity into an opportunity.

This heresy is so palpable that you can easily disprove it. Perhaps some of the deluded will turn to the true way."

"Certainly," I said. "And the nature of this heresy? What must I disprove?" It is a sad indication of my own troubled faith to add that I did not really care. I have dealt with too many heresies. Their beliefs and their questionings echo in my head and trouble my dreams at night. How can I be sure of my own faith? The very edict that had admitted Torgathon into the clergy had caused a half-dozen worlds to repudiate the Bishop of New Rome, and those who had followed that path would find a particularly ugly heresy in the massive naked (save for a damp Roman collar) alien who floated before me and wielded the authority of the Church in four great webbed hands. Christianity is the greatest single human religion, but that means little. The non-Christians outnumber us five to one, and there are well over seven hundred Christian sects, some almost as large as the One True Interstellar Catholic Church of Earth and the Thousand Worlds. Even Daryn XXI, powerful as he is, is only one of seven to claim the title of Pope. My own belief was strong once, but I have moved too long among heretics and nonbelievers, and even my prayers do not make the doubts go away now. So it was that I felt no horror—only a sudden intellectual interest—when the archbishop told me the nature of the heresy on Arion.

"They have made a saint," he said, "out of Judas Iscariot."

As a senior in the Knights Inquisitor, I command my own starship, which it pleases me to call *Truth of Christ.* Before the craft was assigned to me, it was named the *St. Thomas,* after the apostle, but I did not feel a saint notorious for doubting was an appropriate patron for a ship enlisted in the fight against heresy. I have no duties aboard the *Truth,* which is crewed by six brothers and sisters of the Order of St. Christopher the Far-Traveling and captained by a young woman I hired away from a merchant trader.

I was therefore able to devote the entire three-week voyage from Vess to Arion to a study of the heretical Bible, a copy of which had been given to me by the archbishop's administrative assistant. It was a thick, heavy, handsome book, bound in dark leather, its pages edged with gold leaf, with many splendid interior illustrations in full color with holographic enhancement. Remarkable work, clearly done by someone who loved the all-but-

forgotten art of bookmaking. The paintings reproduced inside—the originals were to be found on the walls of the House of St. Judas on Arion, I gathered—were masterful, if blasphemous, as much high art as the Tammerwens and RoHallidays that adorn the Great Cathedral of St. John on New Rome.

Inside, the book bore an imprimatur indicating that it had been approved by Lukyan Judasson, First Scholar of the order of St. Judas Iscariot.

It was called *The Way of Cross and Dragon.*

I read it as the *Truth of Christ* slid between the stars, at first taking copious notes to better understand the heresy that I must fight, but later simply absorbed by the strange, convoluted, grotesque story it told. The words of the text had passion and power and poetry.

Thus it was that I first encountered the striking figure of St. Judas Iscariot, a complex, ambitious, contradictory, and altogether extraordinary human being.

He was born of a whore in the fabled ancient city-state of Babylon on the same day that the Savior was born in Bethlehem, and he spent his childhood in alleys and gutters, selling his own body when he had to, pimping when he became older. As a youth, he began to experiment with the dark arts, and before the age of twenty he was a skilled necromancer. That was when he became Judas the Dragon-Tamer, the first and only man to bend to his will the most fearsome of God's creatures, the great winged fire lizards of Old Earth. The book held a marvelous painting of Judas in some great dank cavern, his eyes aflame as he wielded a glowing lash to keep at bay a mountainous green-gold dragon. Beneath his arm is a woven basket, its lid slightly ajar, and the tiny scaled heads of three dragon chicks are peering from within. A fourth infant dragon is crawling up his sleeve. That was in the first chapter of his life.

In the second, he was Judas the Conqueror, Judas the Dragon-King, Judas of Babylon, the Great Usurper. Astride the greatest of his dragons, with an iron crown on his head and a sword in his hand, he made Babylon the capital of the greatest empire Old Earth had ever known, a realm that stretched from Spain to India. He reigned from a dragon throne amid the Hanging Gardens he had caused to be constructed, and it was there he sat when he tried Jesus of Nazareth, the troublemaking prophet who had been dragged before him bound and bleeding. Judas was not

a patient man, and he made Christ bleed still more before he was through with Him. And when Jesus would not answer his questions, Judas—contemptuous—had Him cast back out into the streets. But first Judas ordered his guards to cut off Christ's legs. "Healer," he said, "heal thyself."

Then came the Repentance, the vision in the night, and Judas Iscariot gave up his crown and his dark arts and his riches, to follow the man he had crippled. Despised and taunted by those he had tyrannized, Judas became the Legs of the Lord, and for a year he carried Jesus on his back to the far corners of the realm he had once ruled. When Jesus did finally heal Himself, then Judas walked at His side, and from that time forth he was Jesus' trusted friend and counselor, the first and foremost of the Twelve. Finally, Jesus gave Judas the gift of tongues, recalled and sanctified the dragons that Judas had sent away, and sent his disciple forth on a solitary ministry across the oceans, "to spread My Word where I cannot go."

There came a day when the sun went dark at noon and the ground trembled, and Judas swung his dragon around on ponderous wings and flew back across the raging seas. But when he reached the city of Jerusalem, he found Christ dead on the cross.

In that moment his faith faltered, and for the next three days the Great Wrath of Judas was like a storm across the ancient world. His dragons razed the Temple in Jerusalem and drove the people from the city and struck as well at the great seats of power in Rome and Babylon. And when he found the others of the Twelve and questioned them and learned of how the one named Simon-called-Peter had three times betrayed the Lord, he strangled Peter with his own hands and fed the corpse to his dragons. Then he sent those dragons forth to start fires throughout the world, funeral pyres for Jesus of Nazareth.

And Jesus rose on the third day, and Judas wept, but his tears could not turn Christ's anger, for in his wrath he had betrayed all of Christ's teachings.

So Jesus called back the dragons, and they came, and everywhere the fires went out. And from their bellies he called forth Peter and made him whole again, and gave him dominion over the Church.

Then the dragons died, and so, too, did all dragons everywhere, for they were the living sigil of the power and wisdom of Judas

Iscariot, who had sinned greatly. And He took from Judas the gift of tongues and the power of healing He had given, and even his eyesight, for Judas had acted as a man blind (there was a fine painting of the blinded Judas weeping over the bodies of his dragons). And He told Judas that for long ages he would be remembered only as Betrayer, and people would curse his name, and all that he had been and done would be forgotten.

But then, because Judas had loved Him so, Christ gave him a boon, an extended life, during which he might travel and think on his sins and finally come to forgiveness, and only then die.

And that was the beginning of the last chapter in the life of Judas Iscariot, but it was a very long chapter indeed. Once Dragon-King, once the friend of Christ, now he became only a blind traveler, outcast and friendless, wandering all the cold roads of the earth, living even when all the cities and people and things he had known were dead. And Peter, the first Pope and ever his enemy, spread far and wide the tale of how Judas had sold Christ for thirty pieces of silver, until Judas dared not even use his true name. For a time he called himself just Wandering Ju', and afterward many other names.

He lived more than a thousand years, and became a preacher, and a healer, and a lover of animals, and was hunted and persecuted when the Church that Peter had founded became bloated and corrupt. But he had a great deal of time, and at last he found wisdom and a sense of peace, and finally Jesus came to him on a long-postponed deathbed, and they were reconciled, and Judas wept once again. And before he died, Christ promised that He would permit a few to remember who and what Judas had been, and that with the passage of centuries the news would spread, until finally Peter's Lie was displaced and forgotten.

Such was the life of St. Judas Iscariot, as related in *The Way of Cross and Dragon.* His teachings were there as well, and the apocryphal books that he had allegedly written.

When I had finished the volume, I lent it to Arla-k-Bau, the captain of the *Truth of Christ.* Arla was a gaunt, pragmatic woman of no particular faith, but I valued her opinion. The others of my crew, the good sisters and brothers of St. Christopher, would only have echoed the archbishop's religious horror.

"Interesting," Arla said when she returned the book to me.

I chuckled. "Is that all?"

She shrugged. "It makes a nice story. An easier read than your Bible, Damien, and more dramatic as well."

"True," I admitted. "But it's absurd. An unbelievable tangle of doctrine, apocrypha, mythology, and superstition. Entertaining, yes, certainly. Imaginative, even daring. But ridiculous, don't you think? How can you credit dragons? A legless Christ? Peter being pieced together after being devoured by four monsters?"

Arla's grin was taunting. "Is that any sillier than water changing into wine, or Christ walking on the waves, or a man living in the belly of a fish?" Arla-k-Bau liked to jab at me. It had been a scandal when I selected a nonbeliever as my captain, but she was very good at her job, and I liked her around to keep me sharp. She had a good mind, Arla did, and I valued that more than blind obedience. Perhaps that was a sin in me.

"There is a difference," I said.

"Is there?" she snapped back. Her eyes saw through my masks. "Ah, Damien, admit it. You rather liked this book."

I cleared my throat. "It piqued my interest," I acknowledged. I had to justify myself. "You know the kind of matter I deal with ordinarily. Dreary little doctrinal deviations, obscure quibblings on theology somehow blown all out of proportion, bald-faced political maneuverings designed to set some ambitious planetary bishop up as a new pope, or to wring some concession or other from New Rome or Vess. The war is endless, but the battles are dull and dirty. They exhaust me, spiritually, emotionally, physically. Afterward I feel drained and guilty." I tapped the book's leather cover. "This is different. The heresy must be crushed, of course, but I admit that I am anxious to meet this Lukyan Judasson."

"The artwork is lovely as well," Arla said, flipping through the pages of *The Way of Cross and Dragon* and stopping to study one especially striking plate. Judas weeping over his dragons, I think. I smiled to see that it had affected her as much as me. Then I frowned.

That was the first inkling I had of the difficulties ahead.

So it was that the *Truth of Christ* came to the porcelain city Ammadon on the world of Arion, where the Order of St. Judas Iscariot kept its House.

Arion was a pleasant, gentle world, inhabited for these past

three centuries. Its population was under nine million; Ammadon, the only real city, was home to two of those millions. The technological level was medium high, but chiefly imported. Arion had little industry and was not an innovative world, except perhaps artistically. The arts were quite important here, flourishing and vital. Religous freedom was a basic tenet of the society, but Arion was not a religious world either, and the majority of the populace lived devoutly secular lives. The most popular religion was Aestheticism, which hardly counts as a religion at all. There were also Taoists, Erikaners, Old True Christers, and Children of the Dreamer, along with a dozen lesser sects.

And finally there were nine churches of the One True Interstellar Catholic faith. There had been twelve.

The three others were now houses of Arion's fastest-growing faith, the Order of St. Judas Iscariot, which also had a dozen newly built churches of its own.

The bishop of Arion was a dark, severe man with close-cropped black hair who was not at all happy to see me. "Damien Har Veris!" he exclaimed in some wonder when I called on him at his residence. "We have heard of you, of course, but I never thought to meet or host you. Our numbers are small here—"

"And growing smaller," I said. "A matter of some concern to my Lord Commander, Archbishop Torgathon. Apparently you are less troubled, Excellency, since you did not see fit to report the activities of this sect of Judas worshipers."

He looked briefly angry at the rebuke, but quickly he swallowed his temper. Even a bishop can fear a Knight Inquisitor. "We are concerned, of course," he said. "We do all we can to combat the heresy. If you have advice that will help us, I will be more than glad to listen."

"I am an Inquisitor of the Order Militant of the Knights of Jesus Christ," I said bluntly. "I do not give advice, Excellency. I take action. To that end I was sent to Arion, and that is what I shall do. Now tell me what you know about this heresy and this First Scholar, this Lukyan Judasson."

"Of course, Father Damien," the bishop began. He signaled for a servant to bring us a tray of wine and cheese, and began to summarize the short, but explosive, history of the Judas cult. I listened, polishing my nails on the crimson lapel of my jacket, until the black paint gleamed brilliantly, interrupting from time to

time with a question. Before he had half-finished, I was determined to visit Lukyan personally. It seemed the best course of action.

And I had wanted to do it all along.

Appearances were important on Arion, I gathered, and I deemed it necessary to impress Lukyan with my self and my station. I wore my best boots, sleek dark handmade boots of Roman leather that had never seen the inside of Torgathon's receiving chamber, and a severe black suit with deep burgundy lapels and stiff collar. From around my neck hung a splendid crucifix of pure gold; my collar pin was a matching golden sword, the sigil of the Knights Inquisitor. Brother Denis painted my nails carefully, all black as ebony, and darkened my eyes as well, and used a fine white powder on my face. When I glanced in the mirror, I frightened even myself. I smiled, but only briefly. It ruined the effect.

I walked to the House of St. Judas Iscariot. The streets of Ammadon were wide and spacious and golden, lined by scarlet trees called whisperwinds, whose long, drooping tendrils did indeed seem to whisper secrets to the gentle breeze. Sister Judith came with me. She is a small woman, slight of build even in the cowled coveralls of the Order of St. Christopher. Her face is meek and kind, her eyes wide and youthful and innocent. I find her useful. Four times now she has killed those who attempted to assault me.

The House itself was newly built. Rambling and stately, it rose from amid gardens of small bright flowers and seas of golden grass, and the gardens were surrounded by a high wall. Murals covered both the outer wall around the property and the exterior of the building itself. I recognized a few of them from *The Way of Cross and Dragon* and stopped briefly to admire them before walking on through the main gate. No one tried to stop us. There were no guards, not even a receptionist. Within the walls, men and women strolled languidly through the flowers, or sat on benches beneath silverwoods and whisperwinds.

Sister Judith and I paused, then made our way directly to the House itself.

We had just started up the steps when a man appeared from within; he stood waiting in the doorway. He was blond and fat, with a great wiry beard that framed a slow smile, and he wore a

flimsy robe that fell to his sandaled feet, and on the robe were dragons bearing the silhouette of a man holding a cross.

When I reached the top of the steps, the man bowed to me. "Father Damien Har Veris of the Knights Inquisitor," he said. His smile widened. "I greet you in the name of Jesus, and St. Judas. I am Lukyan."

I made a note to myself to find out which of the bishop's staff was feeding information to the Judas cult, but my composure did not break. I have been a Knight Inquisitor for a long, long time. "Father Lukyan Mo," I said, taking his hand, "I have questions to ask of you." I did not smile.

He did. "I thought you might," he said.

Lukyan's office was large but spartan. Heretics often have a simplicity that the officers of the true Church seem to have lost. He did have one indulgence, however.

Dominating the wall behind his desk/console was the painting I had already fallen in love with, the blinded Judas weeping over his dragons.

Lukyan sat down heavily and motioned me to a second chair. We had left Sister Judith outside, in the waiting chamber. "I prefer to stand, Father Lukyan," I said, knowing it gave me an advantage.

"Just Lukyan," he said. "Or Luke, if you prefer. We have little use for titles here."

"You are Father Lukyan Mo, born here on Arion, educated in the seminary on Cathaday, former priest of the One True Interstellar Catholic Church of Earth and the Thousand Worlds," I said. "I will address you as befits your station, Father. I expect you to reciprocate. Is that understood?"

"Oh, yes," he said amiably.

"I am empowered to strip you of your right to administer the sacraments, to order you shunned and excommunicated for this heresy you have formulated. On certain worlds I could even order your death."

"But not on Arion," Lukyan said quickly. "We're very tolerant here. Besides, we outnumber you." He smiled. "As for the rest, well, I don't perform those sacraments much anyway, you know. Not for years. I'm First Scholar now. A teacher, a thinker. I show others the way, help them find the faith. Excommunicate me if it

will make you happy, Father Damien. Happiness is what all of us seek."

"You have given up the faith then, Father Lukyan?" I said. I deposited my copy of *The Way of Cross and Dragon* on his desk. "But I see you have found a new one." Now I did smile, but it was all ice, all menace, all mockery. "A more ridiculous creed I have yet to encounter. I suppose you will tell me that you have spoken to God, that He trusted you with this new revelation, so that you might clear the good name, such that it is, of Holy Judas?"

Now Lukyan's smile was very broad indeed. He picked up the book and beamed at me.

"Oh, no," he said. "No, I made it all up."

That stopped me. "What?"

"I made it all up," he repeated. He hefted the book fondly. "I drew on many sources, of course, especially the Bible, but I do think of *Cross and Dragon* mostly as my own work. It's rather good, don't you agree? Of course, I could hardly put my name on it, proud as I am of it, but I did include my imprimatur. Did you notice that? It was the closest I dared come to a by-line."

I was speechless only for a moment. Then I grimaced. "You startle me," I admitted. "I expected to find an inventive madman, some poor self-deluded fool firm in his belief that he had spoken to God. I've dealt with such fanatics before. Instead I find a cheerful cynic who has invented a religion for his own profit. I think I prefer the fanatics. You are beneath contempt, Father Lukyan. You will burn in hell for eternity."

"I doubt it," Lukyan said, "but you do mistake me, Father Damien. I am no cynic, nor do I profit from my dear St. Judas. Truthfully, I lived more comfortably as a priest of your own Church. I do this because it is my vocation."

I sat down. "You confuse me," I said. "Explain."

"Now I am going to tell you the truth," he said. He said it in an odd way, almost as a cant. "I am a Liar," he added.

"You want to confuse me with child's paradoxes," I snapped.

"No, no," he smiled. "A *Liar*. With a capital. It is an organization, Father Damien. A religion, you might call it. A great and powerful faith. And I am the smallest part of it."

"I know of no such church," I said.

"Oh, no, you wouldn't. It's secret. It has to be. You can understand that, can't you? People don't like being lied to."

"I do not like being lied to," I said.

Lukyan looked wounded. "I told you this would be the truth, didn't I? When a Liar says that, you can believe him. How else could we trust each other?"

"There are many of you," I said. I was starting to think that Lukyan was a madman after all, as fanatic as any heretic, but in a more complex way. Here was a heresy within a heresy, but I recognized my duty—to find the truth of things and set them right.

"Many of us," Lukyan said, smiling. "You would be surprised, Father Damien, really you would. But there are some things I dare not tell you."

"Tell me what you dare, then."

"Happily," said Lukyan Judasson. "We Liars, like all other religions, have several truths we take on faith. Faith is always required. There are some things that cannot be proved. We believe that life is worth living. That is an article of faith. The purpose of life is to live, to resist death, perhaps to defy entropy."

"Go on," I said, growing even more interested despite myself.

"We also believe that happiness is a good, something to be sought after."

"The Church does not oppose happiness," I said dryly.

"I wonder," Lukyan said. "But let us not quibble. Whatever the Church's position on happiness, it does preach belief in an afterlife, in a supreme being, and a complex moral code."

"True."

"The Liars believe in no afterlife, no God. We see the universe as it *is,* Father Damien, and these naked truths are cruel ones. We who believe in life, and treasure it, will die. Afterward there will be nothing, eternal emptiness, blackness, nonexistence. In our living there has been no purpose, no poetry, no meaning. Nor do our deaths possess these qualities. When we are gone, the universe will not long remember us, and shortly it will be as if we had never lived at all. Our worlds and our universe will not long outlive us. Ultimately entropy will consume all, and our puny efforts cannot stay that awful end. It will be gone. It has never been. It has never mattered. The universe itself is doomed, transitory, and certainly it is uncaring."

I slid back in my chair, and a shiver went through me as I listened to poor Lukyan's dark words. I found myself fingering my crucifix. "A bleak philosophy," I said, "as well as a false one. I have had that fearful vision myself. I think all of us do, at some

point. But it is not so, Father. My faith sustains me against such nihilism. Faith is a shield against despair."

"Oh, I know that, my friend, my Knight Inquisitor," Lukyan said. "I'm glad to see you understand so well. You are almost one of us already."

I frowned.

"You've touched the heart of it," Lukyan continued. "The truths, the great truths—and most of the lesser ones as well—they are unbearable for most men. We find our shield in faith. Your faith, my faith, any faith. It doesn't matter, so long as we *believe,* really and truly believe, in whatever lie we cling to." He fingered the ragged edges of his great blond beard. "Our psychs have always told us that believers are the happy ones, you know. They may believe in Christ or Buddha or Erika Stormjones, in reincarnation or immortality or nature, in the power of love or the platform of a political faction, but it all comes to the same thing. They believe. They are happy. It is the ones who have seen truth who despair, and kill themselves. The truths are so vast, the faiths so little, so poorly made, so riddled with errors and contradictions. We see around them and through them, and then we feel the weight of darkness on us, and we can no longer be happy."

I am not a slow man. I knew, by then, where Lukyan Judasson was going. "Your Liars invent faiths."

He smiled. "Of all sorts. Not only religious. Think of it. We know truth for the cruel instrument it is. Beauty is infinitely preferable to truth. We invent beauty. Faiths, political movements, high ideals, belief in love and fellowship. All of them are lies. We tell those lies, and others, endless others. We improve on history and myth and religion, make each more beautiful, better, easier to believe in. Our lies are not perfect, of course. The truths are too big. But perhaps someday we will find one great lie that all humanity can use. Until then, a thousand small lies will do."

"I think I do not care for you Liars very much," I said with a cold, even fervor. "My whole life has been a quest for truth."

Lukyan was indulgent. "Father Damien Har Veris, Knight Inquisitor, I know you better than that. You are a Liar yourself. You do good work. You ship from world to world, and on each you destroy the foolish, the rebels, the questioners who would bring down the edifice of the vast lie that you serve."

"If my lie is so admirable," I said, "then why have you abandoned it?"

"A religion must fit its culture and society, work with them, not against them. If there is conflict, contradiction, then the lie breaks down, and the faith falters. Your Church is good for many worlds, Father, but not for Arion. Life is too kind here, and your faith is stern. Here we love beauty, and your faith offers too little. So we have improved it. We studied this world for a long time. We know its psychological profile. St. Judas will thrive here. He offers drama, and color, and much beauty—the aesthetics are admirable. His is a tragedy with a happy ending, and Arion dotes on such stories. And the dragons are a nice touch. I think your own Church ought to find a way to work in dragons. They are marvelous creatures."

"Mythical," I said.

"Hardly," he replied. "Look it up." He grinned at me. "You see, really, it all comes back to faith. Can you really know what happened three thousand years ago? You have one Judas, I have another. Both of us have books. Is yours true? Can you really believe that? I have been admitted only to the first circle of the order of Liars. So I do not know all our secrets, but I know that we are very old. It would not surprise me to learn that the gospels were written by men very much like me. Perhaps there never was a Judas at all. Or a Jesus."

"I have faith that that is not so," I said.

"There are a hundred people in this building who have a deep and very real faith in St. Judas and the Way of Cross and Dragon," Lukyan said. "Faith is a very good thing. Do you know that the suicide rate on Arion has decreased by almost a third since the Order of St. Judas was founded?"

I remember rising slowly from my chair. "You are as fanatical as any heretic I have ever met, Lukyan Judasson," I told him. "I pity you the loss of your faith."

Lukyan rose with me. "Pity yourself, Damien Har Veris," he said. "I have found a new faith and a new cause, and I am a happy man. You, my dear friend, are tortured and miserable."

"That is a lie!" I am afraid I screamed.

"Come with me," Lukyan said. He touched a panel on his wall, and the great painting of Judas weeping over his dragons slid up out of sight, and there was a stairway leading down into the ground. "Follow me," he said.

In the cellar was a great glass vat full of pale green fluid, and in it a *thing* was floating—a thing very like an ancient embryo, aged

and infantile at the same time, naked, with a huge head and a tiny atrophied body. Tubes ran from its arms and legs and genitals, connecting it to the machinery that kept it alive.

When Lukyan turned on the lights, it opened its eyes. They were large and dark, and they looked into my soul.

"This is my colleague," Lukyan said, patting the side of the vat. "Jon Azure Cross, a Liar of the fourth circle."

"And a telepath," I said with a sick certainty. I had led pogroms against other telepaths, children mostly, on other worlds. The Church teaches and the psionic powers are a trap of Satan's. They are not mentioned in the Bible. I have never felt good about those killings.

"Jon read you the moment you entered the compound," Lukyan said, "and notified me. Only a few of us know that he is here. He helps us lie most efficiently. He knows when faith is true and when it is feigned. I have an implant in my skull. Jon can talk to me at all times. It was he who initially recruited me into the Liars. He knew my faith was hollow. He felt the depth of my despair."

Then the thing in the tank spoke, its metallic voice coming from a speaker-grill in the base of the machine that nurtured it. *"And I feel yours, Damien Hars Veris, empty priest. Inquisitor, you have asked too many questions. You are sick at heart, and tired, and you do not believe. Join us, Damien. You have been a Liar for a long, long time!"*

For a moment I hesitated, looking deep into myself, wondering what it was I did believe. I searched for my faith, the fire that had once sustained me, the certainty in the teachings of the Church, the presence of Christ within me. I found none of it, none. I was empty inside, burned out, full of questions and pain. But as I was about to answer Jon Azure Cross and the smiling Lukyan Judasson, I found something else, something I *did* believe in, something I had always believed in.

Truth.

I believed in truth, even when it hurt. *"He is lost to us,"* said the telepath with the mocking name of Cross.

Lukyan's smile faded. "Oh, really? I had hoped you would be one of us, Damien. You seemed ready."

I was suddenly afraid, and I considered sprinting up the stairs to Sister Judith. Lukyan had told me so very much, and now I had rejected them.

The telepath felt my fear. *"You cannot hurt us, Damien,"* it said. *"Go in peace. Lukyan told you nothing."*

Lukyan was frowning. "I told him a good deal, Jon," he said.

"Yes. But can he trust the words of such a Liar as you?" The small misshapen mouth of the thing in the vat twitched in a smile, and its great eyes closed, and Lukyan Judasson sighed and led me up the stairs.

It was not until some years later that I realized it was Jon Azure Cross who was lying, and the victim of his lie was Lukyan. I *could* hurt them. I did.

It was almost simple. The bishop had friends in government and the media. With some money in the right places, I made some friends of my own. Then I exposed Cross in his cellar, charging that he had used his psionic powers to tamper with the minds of Lukyan's followers. My friends were receptive to the charges. The guardians conducted a raid, took the telepath Cross into custody, and later tried him.

He was innocent, of course. My charge was nonsense; human telepaths can read minds in close proximity, but seldom anything more. But they are rare, and much feared, and Cross was hideous enough so that it was easy to make him a victim of superstition. In the end, he was acquitted, and he left the city of Ammadon and perhaps Arion itself, bound for regions unknown.

But it had never been my intention to convict him. The charge was enough. The cracks began to show in the lie that he and Lukyan had built together. Faith is hard to come by, and easy to lose, and the merest doubt can begin to erode even the strongest foundation of belief.

The bishop and I labored together to sow further doubts. It was not as easy as I might have thought. The Liars had done their work well. Ammadon, like most civilized cities, had a great pool of knowledge, a computer system that linked the schools and universities and libraries together, and made their combined wisdom available to any who needed it.

But, when I checked, I soon discovered that the histories of Rome and Babylon had been subtly reshaped, and there were three listings for Judas Iscariot—one for the betrayer, one for the saint, and one of the conqueror-king of Babylon. His name was also mentioned in connection with the Hanging Gardens, and there is an entry for a so-called Codex Judas.

And according to the Ammadon library, dragons became extinct on Old Earth around the time of Christ.

We purged all those lies finally, wiped them from the memories of the computers, though we had to cite authorities on a half-dozen non-Christian worlds before the librarians and academics would credit that the differences were anything more than a question of religious preference.

By then the Order of St. Judas had withered in the glare of exposure. Lukyan Judasson had grown gaunt and angry, and at least half of his churches had closed.

The heresy never died completely, of course. There are always those who believe, no matter what. And so to this day *The Way of Cross and Dragon* is read on Arion, in the porcelain city Ammadon, amid murmuring whisperwinds.

Arla-k-Bau and the *Truth of Christ* carried me back to Vess a year after my departure, and Archbishop Torgathon finally gave me the leave of absence I had asked for, before sending me out to fight still other heresies. So I had my victory, and the Church continued on much as before, and the Order of St. Judas Iscariot was thoroughly crushed. The telepath Jon Azure Cross had been wrong, I thought then. He had sadly underestimated the power of a Knight Inquisitor.

Later, though, I remembered his words.

You cannot hurt us, Damien.

Us?

The Order of St. Judas? Or the Liars?

He lied, I think, deliberately, knowing I would go forth and destroy the Way of Cross and Dragon, knowing, too, that I could not touch the Liars, would not even dare mention them. How could I? Who would credit it? A grand star-spanning conspiracy as old as history? It reeks of paranoia, and I had no proof at all.

The telepath lied for Lukyan's benefit so he would let me go. I am certain of that now. Cross risked much to ensnare me. Failing, he was willing to sacrifice Lukyan Judasson and his lie, pawns in some greater game.

So I left, and I carried within me the knowledge that I was empty of faith, but for a blind faith in truth—truth I could no longer find in my Church.

I grew certain of that in my year of rest, which I spent reading and studying on Vess and Cathaday and Celia's World. Finally I returned to the archbishop's receiving room, and stood again be-

fore Torgathon Nine-Klariis Tûn in my very worst pair of boots. "My Lord Commander," I said to him, "I can accept no further assignments. I ask that I be retired from active service."

"For what cause?" Torgathon rumbled, splashing feebly.

"I have lost the faith," I said to him, simply.

He regarded me for a long time, his pupilless eyes blinking. At last he said, "Your faith is a matter between you and your confessor. I care only about your results. You have done good work, Damien. You may not retire, and we will not allow you to resign."

The truth will set us free.

But freedom is cold, and empty, and frightening, and lies can often be warm and beautiful.

Last year the Church granted me a new ship. I named this one *Dragon.*

THE THIRTEENTH UTOPIA

by Somtow Sucharitkul

Contrasting this story with that of George R. R. Martin shows that both start from much the same premise: a galactic inquisitor whose task is to puncture heresies. In this case, the claim to have created utopia is a heresy because—as we are told even in 20th Century philosophies—utopias are contrary to human nature and hence any such claim must contain a flaw. Here's a situation that seemed to be the exception to that rule. Or was it?

He came to Shtoma in the cadent lightfall, his tachyon bubble breaching the gilt-fringed incandescent clouds like a dark meteor.

Some feelings are never unlearned. Some wonders never fade with experience. So he reflected, Ton Davaryush, master iconoclast, purger of planets, transformer of societies. Especially one: the thrill of power, of potentiality . . . of a virgin utopia, ripe for the unmasking of its purifying flaw.

Every utopia has its flaw. Ton Davaryush wished it were not so. He was sad—but only for a moment—that he must wreak havoc on this planet, even though it lay at the very limits of the Dispersal of Man; but he had learned not to compromise. With the destruction of twelve deceptive utopias, experience had at least banished misgivings. For Davaryush was two hundred and thirteen years old, and at the height of his analytic powers.

He closed his curiously heavy-lidded eyes to the shimmering of the cloud-banks and the extravagance of the alien landscape that grew constantly as he fell, with its strange sharp-angled trees like gigantic pink spiders, their photosynthesizing pigment having a ferric, not a magnesium base, and its whimsical spiral dwellings of transparent plastic, jutting up at irregular intervals from the blanket of dense vegetation, crimsons and vermilions. He ignored them, and the savage thrashings of the wind as his translucent sphere automatically adjusted to the gravity, softening his fall for landing on Shtoma.

And thought of the covenant: *for the breaking of joy is the beginning of wisdom.* And thought, pathetically: I, Ton Davaryush, expelled from the mainstream of human society by time dilations and the gulfs of space, am too alone. He tried to bury himself—eyes still closed to the atmospheric turmoil—in analyses of what he had been told about this world. How they had fallen into a pattern, an ecological stasis, from which he must release them, whatever the cost. And this was no backward, back-to-nature primitivistic planet, exulting in its own self-conscious apartness and ignorance, but a world whose technical sophistication rivalled his own; exceeded it, in at least one respect, for Shtoma alone, in the entire Dispersal of Man, knew the secret of gravity control. For which they had no use, except for the manufacture of toys. And which they guarded with such miserliness and irrational fervor as to belie their much-vaunted saintliness, their notorious lack of greed and every other human quality. And the rumor that Shtoma was a utopia was more than could be tolerated.

If it was a utopia it could be destroyed. This he knew. He understood every facet of the utopian heresy. He was a master iconoclast, dedicated to the perpetuation of change. *Every utopia has its flaw.* He clutched this knowledge to him like a secret prayer.

I may be a saviour.

He opened his eyes finally. And saw the incredible wildness, the intractable angularity of the landscape, the lurid carmines and scarlets of the trees that lurched toward him with their arachnoid arms outstretched. His bubble slowed itself, gradually, to bring him to the field of rust-colored grass. Alien buzzings and high-pitched song-snatches assailed his ears.

He deactivated his tachyon bubble with a flick of his mind—the keys were cybernetically brain-implanted—and was now at

the mercy of the alien environment. At some indeterminate future, he would be rescued—when the computer on homeworld decided.

I may be a saviour. This was more important to him than why they had jealously hidden their secret from a galaxy where knowledge was not for concealing, why they had not used their secret for conquest, as was their right. But this would come. *I am bringing them their human nature,* he thought. The thrill of it lived in his heart. (For this thrill he had joined the Inquest.)

He drew his shimmercloak over his shoulder. It absorbed the fresh air and began to radiate in the safe range, as he knew it would: he stroked it softly as it blushed, pink against the aquamarine fur; wishing, as always, that it was not a dumb semisentient. For he was alone.

Turning in the direction of the nearest habitation, he reviewed once more all he had been told about Shtoma.

A planet unaccountably close to its primary, a white dwarf, yet environmentally anomalous: Earth-sized, temperate, with the wrong atmosphere. With incredible potential for economic power, yet with no armed forces, which ignored the rest of the Dispersal of Man, the galactic authority—leading inexorably to the heretic suspicion of utopia! He began walking. It was not the Inquest's way to arrive conspicuously, gaudy with the trappings of salvation.

But then a stranger stood in his path, unmoving. An oldish man, clad severely in a brown tunic; clearly a peasant or slave. He was looking at the ground, and Davaryush had come quite close to him.

The stranger looked up at Davaryush and sang, in a clear tenor, the first alien words he had heard since his arrival, words he was to hear so many times on Shtoma:

qithe qithembara
udres a kilima shtoisti.

Davaryush signalled to his polyglot implant, then closed his eyes to see, as though inscribed on a white page before him, the words

"soul, renounce suffering;
you have danced on the face of the sun."

It appeared to be a form of greeting. But the strange words, with their opaque and patently sinful meaning, strengthened his suspicions; and he approached the stranger diffidently. There was one other thing experience never banished: fear.

Activating his implant so that it would intervene in his speech functions, he said: "I am from another world. Who may I address?"

The alien's gaze chilled him, though it contained no malice. "You are Inquestor Davaryush, of the Clan of Ton. Welcome." Abruptly the stranger beamed and stretched out his arms to embrace Davaryush. The Inquestor yielded ungracefully. He had misjudged; this was no peasant. "We were expecting you."

"Yes. I come to investigate Shtoma's utopian possibilities, so that it may be considered for the honour of being named a Human Sanctuary." Davaryush did not blush at the lie, for it came easily to him by now.

"So! How delightful." His eyes laughed themselves into a hatchwork of wrinkles. "I am your host, Ernad. You must be weary; come."

Who was this man, poorly dressed and without a single attendant, who dared to address a Master Inquestor by name and who knew his mission? Again the alienness of the world unnerved him. The clouds had parted to reveal the white dwarf sun, unnaturally close. The rough wind tousled the grass, blood-red and tall. He started to answer Ernad, but the old man had turned, expecting Davaryush to follow him.

A stony path, pebbled with shiny stones, led to the first recognizably human artifact: a displacement plate, metallic and incongruous in the middle of the field. He was unprepared for this. He was forced to remind himself that this was no primitive world—in spite of the absence of war or, apparently, slavery. "When can I begin my investigation? The Inquest must know soon, in time for the Grand Convocation," he said.

Ernad beckoned Davaryush onto the plate. "Frankly, we have so little involvement with the worlds outside—" he began, then stopped himself. "Well, as you wish; whenever you wish." Davaryush was suspicious of the warmth in his voice, but it appeared convincing. Clearly he was dealing with a master of ambiguity. But the impropriety and unashamedness of "little involvement" compounded his bewilderment.

They materialized in what appeared to be one of the structures he had glimpsed during the landing.

He reeled with the vertigo of it—the crazy swirlings and spirallings of transparent walls, the cacophony of chimings and chirpings that bombarded his senses. How could they live amid

such a wilderness of sensual stimuli? Where was their discipline, their culture? A woman nearly ran into him, then trotted away, laughing, children and young people sauntered by, gaily calling out *"qithe qithembara; udres a kilima shtoistil"* completely without respect. "You must forgive them," said Ernad, interrupting his dismay. "You are an offworlder, and . . . well, it is especially exciting for them now. It is almost time for the festival of Initiation, and anything can spark their enthusiasm." He said this matter-of-factly, with no trace of criticism in his voice, again pointing up his alienness.

"They are your attendants?" Surely someone important enough to be his host would have servants of a kind.

"No; neighbours, relatives, friends. My house is theirs."

But Davaryush was thinking: what of the initiation ceremony? Perhaps that was the flaw. Perhaps there was some unspeakable rite, some trauma they were all forced to go through . . . perhaps this would be the handle he could use to save this misguided people.

"Ernad, I must rest," he said. "But after, I would see everything on your world: your games, your pleasures, your prisons, your criminals, your asylums, your places of execution."

"Ah. Yes, I have heard of madmen and criminals. I am not uneducated, Inquestor Ton," replied Ernad mysteriously. They turned down a corridor of glass that swerved upwards into the air, and Davaryush felt a sudden dislocation, as though he had changed weight or *down* had become sideways, and he found they were walking upside down, on the ceiling. "What is happening?"

Ernad laughed mildly. "It is the same principle, you know, as the varigrav coasters. You must have seen them, our principal export—"

"But why fool around with gravity inside your dwellings?"

"Why not? Would you not be bored, if all directions remained constantly the same . . . ?"

Up became *down* again. They reached a large chamber that seemed to be perched, precariously, on the point of a translucent pyramid in the sky. "Your resting place. It is my own chamber, Inquestor; I trust you will find it comfortable."

Davaryush's eye alighted on the only adornment of the room, apart from the resting-pad. It was a huge, capelike sheet of some sheer material that hung on one wall, like a rainbow sail, rippling

softly in the ventilating breeze. It was beautiful, he conceded, but bewilderingly complex, uncivilized. "This cape? What is it for?"

"Oh. My wings," Ernad said.

Davaryush knew then how addicted they must be to the varigrav coasters, those toys they had inflicted on the rest of the galaxy. And he looked at the old man, who seemed utterly ingenuous, and wondered if it were possible that this sincerity were not, after all, the product of a trained deviousness, but merely a product of his lower mentality.

For here was a toy, hanging on the wall as though it were a god.

"Leave me, Ernad," he said brusquely.

He was trying to establish authority, the distancing proper for an Inquestor. He needed to preserve his mask of sternness, for he was already sad. He was vulnerable, he realized, even after twelve successful missions.

For he was nothing if not compassionate.

You have compassion, Davaryush.

"Yes, Father." He was twelve years old, veteran of three wars, and now an initiate. And alone, in the small room, with the Inquestor, whose eyes glared fire and millennial wisdom. Now after more than two centuries, the scene returned, vivid.

When you came to kill the condemned criminal, you did not torture him or play with him, as was your right, an essential part of the initiation. You killed him cleanly, in a matter of seconds, slicing him into two congruent parts with your energizer. It was artistically done. But why?

"Father, it was necessary to show skill, not cruelty. I have already killed many people." He feigned an assurance that was far from his true feelings.

Very well. I name you to the Clan of Ton.

Davaryush started, gasped audibly despite his knowledge of proper conduct . . . he had come expecting to fail, to be returned to homeworld. The Clan of Ton . . . that would mean seminary, long lonely years on harsh, inhospitable planets, unwelcome, thankless labour for the sake of pure altruism. "Father—"

You are unworthy. I know. Nevertheless, the Inquest takes what it can get.

His first mission was the planet Gom, a hot planet of a blue-

white star. The people lived in tall buildings, thousands to a building, fifteen billion to the planet. But they were happy. They were quite ignorant of their responsibilities as a fallen race; reliant on automata, they pursued their hedonistic existence without regard for their true natures. They suffered from the heresy of utopia.

He remembered how he found the flaw to that utopia. Every year, in a special ceremony marked by compulsive gratifications of the senses, all those over the age of fifty intoxicated themselves and then committed suicide, leaping by thousands into the volcanic lava lakes that boiled ubiquitously on every continent.

He had saved them. Whispering to only one or two: *and what if you did not die?* he had created civil wars, revolutions, unhappiness. People ran mad, setting fire to the machines that had succored them. Then the ships of the Inquest came, bringing comfort with them, comfort and truth.

But the happiness had tempted him. *Remember, man is a fallen creature, Davaryush. Utopias exist only in the mind, a state to which it is given us to aspire. But to imagine we have attained that state—that is to deny life. The breaking of joy is the beginning of wisdom.*

Now he was no longer tempted. For he had seen such as the planet Eldereldad, where the happy ones feasted on their own children, which they produced in great litters, by hormonal stimulation; and the planet Xurdeg, his most recent mission, where the people smiled constantly, irritatingly, showing no face except the face of rapt ecstasy, until he finally learned that the penalty for grief was dismemberment, to feed the hungry demands of the degenerating bodies of five-thousand-year-old patriarchs . . . yet when he had asked one of these ancients, what he most desired, he had replied: *To feel grief. But I am afraid to die for it.*

Ton Alkamathdes, Grand Inquestor of his Sector, who had watched his initiation and had chosen him out for the Clan of Ton, had said to him that day when he was a young boy facing his new destiny: *Never forget the lie. This lie is the sacrifice that you must make, the little sin that you must commit, for the sake of saving countless millions. The lie is this: the Inquest is seeking a perfect utopia, a planet that will be designated a Human Sanctuary, for the edification and glory of the Dispersal of Man. You will tell them that always, and always you will understand in your heart that there will exist one tragic flaw.*

And always, the ships of the Inquest would follow him. And after, in a year or two, or perhaps a few decades, they would awake to their true natures, and they would fight wars and exhibit avarice and pitilessness, like all the other worlds. Man is a fallen being.

Remember: you are a guardian of the human condition. He felt the eyes of Ton Alkamathdes on him, even two centuries away and countless parsecs, boring into his soul, purifying him; and in their sternness he drew a kind of comfort. But then he awoke, long before dawn, and was on Shtoma and frighteningly alone, exposed to the alien sky under the structures of glass and clear plastics. He found a young girl singing to him, "qithe qithembara, Lord Inquestor."

He sat up abruptly, reaching for a nonexistent weapon. "Who are you?"

"I am Alk, daughter of Ernad." (The voice haunted his thoughts for many days, reminding him of the whispering sea on homeworld.) "Will you be pleased with me? Of all the children who saw you, I was most taken by you, Inquestor."

They were depraved, shockingly amoral! They sent their own children to sleep with strangers! "No!" he cried out, and the severity of his own emotion startled them both. "On our worlds we do not do things like this."

"But father said to show you our love, the love of *udara.*"

Udara? (Their name for the dwarf star, their sun, whispered his polyglot implant. Again he was puzzled.)

"Leave me, please." He tried to exclude the pain from his voice. Shame flooded him. In the starlight he saw disappointment on her face, and thought: they do not even hide their emotions! what savages, what innocents! And without a further word she rose and left him, noiseless as a breeze.

Quickly he ran through what he had learnt in those few hours. They dressed severely, denying all rank and pomp and selfimportance; they made curious fetish of their wings, they were morally loose, they did not make any effort to conceal their feelings, but were like children, wholly innocent of the need for tact and diplomacy—and this last thing, the love of *udara.* That could mean anything. Every perversion, every practice of perversion was possible, because of the human condition.

And, under the strange constellations, knowing that he had no weapons and that he could not know when he would be rescued,

he began to recite the first prayer he had ever learnt. Its meaning, for its language was no longer spoken, was a sublime mystery to the Inquest, but all who went through the seminary could repeat it, as a solace, in times of emotional turmoil. The nonsense words—perhaps little more than gibberish distorted by man's long history—were a kind of bond between the members of the Inquest, all solitary men: "pater noster, qui es in inferno . . ."

"But—what is *in* these black boxes? I have seen several during my stay here," Davaryush demanded of the heretic priest.

The white-bearded old man—a magnificent mottlement of wrinkles and discolorations, without the common decency of cosmetics—smiled beneficently at him. *"Udara,"* he said. *"Udara* is in them.

"Will you not touch it?" the priest said, beckoning to him. The temple's black box—it was perhaps a meter square—stood in the center of the transparent hall which could have held ten thousand people without any trouble. It was the only object in the chamber. "Come, touch; you will feel *udara.*"

Hesitantly, Davaryush went up to it with his hand outstretched. He felt wobbly-kneed, as though his weight were constantly shifting, as though he were losing control of his limbs. Gingerly, he brushed the cool metal with his fingertips.

Overwhelming joy coursed through his thoughts for a moment. He saw homeworld fleetingly, and ached for it; heard the music of the sea, saw vividly the faces of his parents, whom his own time dilation had stranded in an unreachable past . . . they smiled at him, he was a child half their height, reaching up to touch their faces, laughing . . .

And snatched away his hand as though he had been burnt. This was dangerous, clearly some powerful hallucinogenic device. He stared at his hand in terror.

The happiness he had just felt echoed in his mind. He was tempted to reach out again, and he controlled himself with tremendous difficulty, and knew he had stumbled upon one of the key clues to what was wrong with Shtoma.

They were selfdeluders, obviously, intoxicating themselves with false memories and artificially induced joys.

"Did you not feel the love of *udara,* stranger?"

"No, priest. I felt—I remembered something I thought I had lost forever." He turned to leave.

"You do not wish for more? Ah, but you have not danced on the face of the sun."

He turned again, saw the look of pity in the priest's face, the expression of *ah, but you are incapable of understanding.* So he walked hurriedly out, not bothering to acknowledge the priest's hearty "qithe qithembara."

Ernad was waiting for him, and the girl Alk, who was—by daylight—a creature of striking beauty, not in her facial features but in the way she moved and spoke; and another of Ernad's children, Eshly, a little boy of about six, who prattled and asked questions as though he were much younger, and was quite devoid of discipline. They walked on to the next displacement plate: Ernad smiling, the girl and her brother running excitedly, then lagging behind, Davaryush moody. Ernad told him more about the Shtoikitha, the people of the dance (and they called their planet Shtoma, *Danceworld.*)

"Yes, we're a very thinly populated planet, only half a million souls . . . what do we eat? There is fruit in the forests, small animals too, crustacea of fantastical shapes in the rivers; we don't have agriculture here. The fruit of the *gruyesh* falls to the ground and ripens, and when it turns mauve we tap it for the *zul,* that mildly fermented sweet juice that you drank this morning . . ."

"Crime?"

"Why should anyone commit it?" Ernad laughed gently. "We have *udara,* you see, so it isn't necessary."

"I don't understand. My polyglot implant translates that word simply as "sun"; but I have heard it in at least a dozen meanings since I came to Shtoma. I know that semantics aren't perfect, but could I be missing something? You can't tell me that your people, in all their evident complexity, attribute all your fortunes to some mythical property of your sun!"

Davaryush was exasperated now. It was becoming a strain to maintain his investigator's pose. Clearly the problem on this planet had to do with some fundamental misunderstanding of the workings of the universe.

They had come to a small clearing, having vanished and rematerialized several times: it was level, dotted with pink shrubs . . . the two children, or rather the young woman and the boy, had run forward, breathless, and had collapsed, exhausted, on the grass . . . *by now, they would both be warriors, in the real world,*

he thought. How sad, that they were trapped in a permanent preadolescence.

The boy he felt compassion for: he was like a retarded child who is nevertheless extremely beautiful. But Ernad was talking again.

"Still you don't see, you don't comprehend the elegant simplicity of it. Relax! Feel the singing in the sky: one cannot commit evil here."

He tried to feel, sensing, in the absurdity of the old man's beliefs, some core of faith that he would never be able to alter . . . the soft sussurant rustlings of the red forests sang to him, but in their singing was mingled, chillingly, an image of homeworld . . . he tensed, instinctively, knowing he was playing with fire.

"Have you ever ridden a varigrav coaster?"

"No!" The thought horrified him. Abandonment to the senses, to utter helplessness! Never would he . . .

"It is a pity. What *did* you feel, when I asked you to listen to the music of *udara?*"

(Again, some obscure semantic twist.) "I don't know. A memory. It doesn't matter."

"On the contrary; it probably *does* matter. But you will learn at the initiation ceremony, perhaps."

"I am to take part?" Nothing would induce him to take part in any barbarian rite! Why, he might be mutilated, he might have to watch some unspeakable evil . . . but Ernad smiled the smile that excluded him from those who understood, frustrating him even more. *"Udara* is the key to what you are searching for, you know. Without it, this world would surely not be the paradise it has become."

"Why, that's ridiculous."

The two children of his host had come up and were watching him intently. "Father," said the boy Eshly, "don't be hard on the poor man."

He was so naive, so tactless, so ignorant! But Alk only looked at him, knowing what had passed between them in the night. (He knew now that no stigma was attached to sexual promiscuity; an expression of affection, nothing more. Finally, he had had to concede that this in itself was no flaw.)

"I must show you—" Ernad began.

"Take him to the nearest varigrav coaster, *please,* Father," Eshly cried urgently. He clasped Davaryush's hand—such pre-

sumption in a stripling, such undeserved trust—and propelled him towards the nearest displacement plate.

And in an instant they were at the edge of a cliff, sheer and blindingly white, that stretched perhaps half a kilometer down to a cleared and endless plain, without the pink of vegetation. The plate where they had arrived stood in the shadow of a tremendously tall column of the transparent building material they used. It was slender—the width of a few men, and it reached up to vanish somewhere in the vague loftiness of the clouds that hid *Udara* from view then. This was nothing like the varigrav coasters he had seen, children's pleasure things. This was overpoweringly stark, and huge; a quasi-religious luminousness emanated from it. Its vastness distorted the scale of everything, so he felt a crazy disorientation, while the two children, in nonchalant irreverence, were pushing him to the other side, shouting at him to hurry.

"Quick, come, Inquestor!" shouted Eshly. A lift platform was descending for them. Turning to watch the sky beyond the cliff, Davaryush saw black dots and smudges, microscopic in the expanse of sky and white plain, and he knew what they were. An ancient fear petrified him, he was like a robot as they buckled him in to the elevator. Suddenly, with a wild jerk, they were aloft, racing up to the starting point in the clouds, and the rushing blood in his brain crashed against the rushing of the mad winds. He was nauseous; he closed his eyes and muttered his ancient prayer, longing for an end.

At the top there was a sort of control room, diving platforms of various sizes, racks where sets of wings were set out, not the rainbow-colored type that adorned his resting-room, but plain ones, black or gray. Alk and Eshly each seized a set of wings and had run to the platforms and leapt off the edge while Davaryush fought a wild impulse to go to their rescue.

He saw them in the air, falling, falling with dizzying speed, and soon they had vanished—and then he saw them again, flung violently upward by the interplay of differing gravity fields, screeching with delight as the varigravs hurled them into turbulent whirlpools, and the wind, which was pulled in so many different directions that it was a distended, distorted tornado blasting his ears. He found himself clutching the railings in terror, he who had seen nine wars.

But the squeals of pleasure became fainter. The two became black dots, joining the rapidly shifting patterns of swirling specks

in the distance. It was more tolerable to look at, pretty patterns against the sky, but when he thought about what was happening to them (gravity fields wrenching them in different directions, stretching their bodies' tolerance to its very limits, how could anyone find it pleasurable?) he—

"Please, take me out of this."

"As you wish."

They went into the control room. They shut out the roaring of the winds and the silence shocked him for a moment, before he gathered his analytic senses enough to look around him . . . it was an empty room, like all the others he had seen on Shtoma, domed in the standard material, so that *udara* shone relentlessly inside, with a half-dozen of the black boxes predictably scattered, haphazardly, across the floor.

"I'm impressed." Davaryush tried to sound sincere. "How does it all work, incidentally?" He laboured a little over the casual tone of this question, since finding out the secret would make a great difference to the other civilized worlds.

"The scientific principle, or the technical aspects?" Davaryush was startled for a moment by the man's willingness to reveal.

"Both."

"Well, you know as well as I do that gravity control works by selective graviton exchange . . . the coaster also manufactures antigravitons, which exist of course only with some difficulty under normal conditions."

"But how *do* you manufacture antigravitons?" Davaryush was excited; uncautiously he let it slip through, was not devious enough in asking the question. Ernad seemed not to be aware of such things.

"I'm simply not a scientist," he said—he did not sound at all as if he was trying to put Davaryush off—"and in any case *udara* controls details like that." He pointed happily to the boxes.

Again the evasive tactics, the semantic deceptions! If the people of Shtoma were able to lie with such easy naturalness, perhaps Shtoma had never been a logical candidate for utopiahood. Perhaps his journey had been wasted.

But the Grand Inquestor had entrusted him, and the Inquest was wise.

He saw the children returning, swung upwards in a golden arc that transsected *udara* through the shimmering cloud-banks . . .

"Time to go home. It will be night." Ernad motioned to his guest. "I hope you will feel more comforable this time, and not be so afraid of the height."

The black boxes glinted in the *udara*-light. They attributed everything to those boxes, Davaryush thought. Was their something in it? Of course not. They were lying to him, creating some enormous joke at his expense.

Walking home through the ruddy terrain, Ernad told him how everybody on Shtoma participated in the initiation ceremonies every five years, almost to a man, because those who had been through it once could be renewed, purified. "You will understand everything, you know, once you have taken part—the black boxes, the *udara*-concepts. I know that you find us strange." He chuckled to himself, then added earnestly, "You will take part, won't you?"

Slowly, with the realization that he might well be falling into a trap, a trap cleverly constructed upon his own curiosity and on the necessities of his mission, he said: "I have no choice." For his mission was to understand, and after understanding to control. Even now, compassion touched him, more than ever before.

The accident happened.

Eshly, the boy, had run on ahead to the next displacement plate. He tripped and stumbled, face down, and the power surged. They were upon him, the resounding clang echoing in the woods. The three of them knelt down by the plate.

He lay like a discarded toy. The displacement field had aborted —it was an accident that practically never occurred, was almost unthinkable—and had wrenched half his body away and then slung it back in a nanosecond, so that he was in one piece, but impossibly bent.

Davaryush waited for the tears, for the signs of grief. But the only sighing was the breeze and the voices of the alien forest. Lightfall was ending.

"Go on, Alk," Ernad whispered to his daughter, "the others will want to know." His voice was icy calm.

Davaryush stood to follow as he lifted up the corpse, which seemed merely asleep until one saw the inhuman angle of the arms, and carried it into the encroaching forest, and returned without it, with the red shadows darkening him. There seemed to be no sadness in his face. Indeed, he almost smiled. Was this

some incredible fortitude, even in the face of an impossible tragedy? Davaryush devoured the man with his eyes, seeking some clue to his emotions. And he thought: *I have found the flaw.*

And now it was time to plant the doubt, because the lowest point in a man's being is also the beginning of his ascent. Davaryush thought bitterly: here is a people that blithely throws the bodies of its sons into the forests to rot, that has forgotten grief, that does not value human life at all. Here was the flaw.

Davaryush tried to put a lot of anger into his voice, to exclude compassion while not striving too much for an oracular effect: "You don't care about your child," he said. "Love is not part of your utopia, is it? Humanity is what you have abandoned, isn't it?" *Now you are going to break down. Now your repressed humanity will come rushing to the surface.* It had happened twelve times before, and countless other times with our Inquestors.

Ernad did not collapse. He stared at Ernad with unmitigated pity.

"Of course I grieve for him. I am desolate, Davaryush. But you do not understand our perspectives, or our overview of life. With renewal my grief will be cleansed. And I grieve for him most, that he did not live to dance on the face of the sun."

And Davaryush knew that he had understood nothing at all, nothing. Never had he felt so palpably the alienness of this world, the total incommunicableness of it. His mind whirled in a wild kaleidoscope of images: strange winds, blood-crimson forests with spider arms, flagrantly immodest buildings open to the elements, a dead child unmourned, a dead child who had been playing games amidst the incomprehensible forces of black boxes that manipulated gravity fields . . . and this strange man's face, which should be racked with sorrow, yet insulted him with an unwanted pity. *I wish I could kill him.*

The death-impulse rose in him, a monster of the subconscious, and he suppressed it with a superhuman effort. *He is a product of his misguided culture, not to be blamed,* he reminded himself. *I have come to save him; I must never forget that: even if I cause his death, I come as a saviour.*

He had miscalculated again. Thinking to elicit from the stranger his hidden guilt, his dormant human responses, he had instead forced his own desire to kill to the surface. This desire should long have been dead, since he had renounced it for the sake of the salvation of the Dispersal of Man; yet it haunted him

still, a specter from the buried past. Perhaps the will of the man was stronger than his . . .

At last he found he could feel a bond between himself and the alien, in this moment of deepest misunderstanding. For they were both men, both fallen beings.

"Ernad," said Davaryush, "I pity you." The two of them walked, through the miscoloured landscape, up to the twisted house.

Asleep that night, he was nine years old, celebrating the end of his first war.

And they came to Alykh, the pleasure planet. He and Tymyon and Ayulla and Kyg and the other companions, lost themselves in the cacophony of the crowds.

"Wait till you see *this!*" Kyg shouted, and she leapt on to the plate like a cat. They disappeared—

And Davaryush saw it, a topless tower of brick and stone and concrete and plastic and sparkling amethysts, studding the walls like jewelled knuckle-dusters . . .

"What *is* it?"

"Daavye, don't you know *anything?*" Tymyon cackled offensively.

Kyg said, with mock primness: "It's a . . . VARIGRAV COASTER!"

The tower glinted oddly, catching the sunset. "Look," said Kyg impatiently, "you dive off the top, you see, and it sets into action a series of random gravity-field interferences, and you plummet like a hawk and you float upward and you swing dangerously and you curve and then you land where you started, like a feather."

("It's beautiful," whispered Ayulla the silent.)

"Well, let's GO!" Tymyon and Kyg raced each other to the tower, and the crowds were everywhere, aliens, child-warriors brandishing their weapons, pimps, crusader-flagellants, Inquestors and their retinues, slave-hunters, veiled Whisper-shadows from the borders of the Dispersal, dirty children strumming on dream-harps, dissonant alien musics, and an itinerant space opera howling full-blast through amplification jewels, and Davaryush was spellbound, unmoving.

He had never . . .

The tower held him.

And the little specks that were people, dust-motes in the violet sunset.

"Aren't you coming?" Ayulla's voice was almost lost in the confusion.

"No." He was petrified.

"Come *on!* They're all the rage now, all the way from Shtoma you know, from the limits of the Dispersal . . ."

"No! No!" (It was said that the greatest thrill, when you fell, was the very certainty of death, suddenly averted by a twist of the field. At the moment of inevitable doom, it was said, you felt so *alive.*)

Ayulla was laughing at him. "How many people have you killed, Daavye? How can you be so scared of *life?*"

(He was ashamed. He resolved, then, to change his circle of friends.)

Now wake up. Face the hostile planet.

He moved, murmuring "Homeworld."

Shrill cries of children awakened him. And then Alk was at the entrance to his room: "Initiation, Inquestor; hurry."

He threw on his shimmercloak. It tightened around him, sensing his need for warmth, though it was not cold.

The wings on the walls had gone.

The whole family, a dozen or more of them, trooped without ceremony into his room, heady exhilaration in their faces. Quickly he followed them outside, struggling to keep up with them. His heart had sunk when he saw that the wings had vanished. For he had an inkling, now, of what this rite must involve, and it terrified him.

Many displacements later, they were on a mountain top overlooking a vast plain that glittered silver-gray with a thousand spaceships. The ships littered the fields, end to end so that the red grass was quite covered, all the way to the horizon . . . he could not imagine what they were for. Shtoma had hardly any commerce with other worlds.

"Isn't it breathtaking?" Alk grasped his arm, and he felt himself shivering . . .

"How many of them *are* there, Ernad?" he said, wonderingly. This ceremony involved a journey, it seemed; perhaps on some satellite, some other planet.

The children were dancing and tugging at him and hollering in

circles round him, and Ernad did not seem disposed to answer his questions. "Come," he said, and after another displacement they were at the entrance to a ship. (It was much as he knew them; ships did not differ much, having been perfected many millennia ago, before the Dispersal.) But the number of them! And the mobs of people, their wings tucked under their arms, giggling, chattering away as they climbed into them!

In the mid-distance, some of them had already risen. They rose at even intervals, in perfect order, and he could see a long chain of them stretching into the sky, where they glittered like a jewelled necklace in the early lightfall. Quickly (almost shamefacedly) he stifled his wonder, for he knew he must analyze *everything,* if he was to solve the most taxing problem of his life, the enigma of Shtoma.

So he climbed the steep steps into the belly of the ship.

It was only a small cruiser, built for perhaps five hundred; there must be a thousand of them, then, to hold the whole population of Shtoma. It was impersonal, gray-walled like every ship; and it appeared to be a short-hauler, so Davaryush knew they were not going off-system. People were filing into their chambers, seeming to know exactly where they belonged; Davaryush stood stupidly for a few moments before Alk came for him, and took him to the family's cabin.

After a while, he felt the noiseless lifting of the ship.

Some time later Ernad led him to the viewroom, whose screens afforded an unobstructed three hundred and sixty degree view of space; and he saw how the line of ships trailed behind and before, each an exact distance from the other, links in a metal serpent of space . . . he asked Ernad where they were going.

"To *udara,* of course!" The old man looked blankly at him.

"Not seriously."

"Are there any other planets in this system? Any moons? We are not a mendacious people, Davaryush; perhaps that has not occurred to you yet." He spoke patiently, as though reproving a favorite child, and the attitude stung Davaryush.

He turned to see, on the other side of the room, that *udara* had swollen and was a blindingly white flameball against the blackness. He knew by now that when the word *udara* came up he would get nowhere; so he tried something else. The ubiquitous black boxes were everywhere; in the viewroom they were stacked neatly in the middle of the floor.

"Those *udara*-boxes: they power the ship perhaps?" he said, only half-skeptical.

Ernad laughed again, enjoying his guest's ignorance. (Again Davaryush felt a bitter hate, a death-lust, for his host.) "Not at all; they are quite empty, and our spaceships work in the normal way."

After a moment he said: "Now look, Inquestor: they are darkening the screen, or else *udara* would become unbearable."

"How can you say we are going there!"

"Just look at the face of the sun. There, look."

Udara was growing rapidly, and Davaryush saw: "There's a black spot on the sun's surface!"

"*That's* where we are going."

The black dot was perfectly round. This was impossible. "It must be artificial!" he gasped. These people, far from being simple utopians, were capable of galaxy-dominating technological feats!

"Artificial? In a manner of speaking." Then he explained, "The dot of course is only black by comparison, obviously; when we get there it will appear white and incandescent."

The screen was cut in half! One side was completely black, the other painfully bright, and there were white flame-tongues that shot up, a hundred kilometers high. They were approaching the sun's atmosphere; in its heart, Davaryush knew, matter was packed into inconceivable density.

"And now . . . there are tablets you must take, since you will not be able to breathe for a few hours; they will release oxygen into your bloodstream."

"What do you mean?"

"You're going to jump into the sun."

Davaryush understood now. They had led him on, and all the time were preparing this elaborate fiery execution. "I'll vaporize instantly!" he said.

"You don't understand, do you?" Ernad countered with surprising vehemence. "Gravity is under control, heat is under control! This is no ordinary star, this is *udara.* Every five years, we all ride on the gravity-fields here, and become clean . . ."

Davaryush's mind reeled under the impact of this relevation. The sun filled the screen completely now, unbelievably white . . . "You mean that you *built* this star? You built a *varigrav coaster* on the surface of a *sun?*"

"If only we had the technology!" Ernad smiled a little. "Why, the mind boggles. You are so close to the answer, and yet so far, so incredibly far! Well, we are all bound by the limits of our experience. It is time to live; explanations will follow."

They were in the airlock, then; waves of nausea crashed in his head, and he stood stock-still like a martyr waiting for death (which he felt himself to be) while they put the wings on him and the tittering of the children pelted his brain like painful hail-pellets—

The airlock opened!

There was whiteness, such whiteness. He shut his eyes and fell.

Fell. Fell.

His blood was burning. He was burning, he was falling into hell, plummeting helplessly into the scorchswift firebreath of the sunwind. He screamed, he thrashed his body uselessly against emptiness, he opened his eyes and the whiteness shattered his vision, the featureless whiteness, so he screamed and screamed, until he was no longer aware of his screaming.

He heard voices out of the past (Kill the criminal Daavye no I can't I can't you have compassion my son compassion man is a fallen being).

He reached the limit of his falling. And soared! And was flying upwards, upwards, on an antigraviton tide! And swerved, and fell headlong again, and swooped in tandem with a tongue of flame, and his scream was a whisper in the thunder of the wind (come on Daavye you fool it's the latest craze *no!* are you afraid of life or something Daavye Daavye?) and fell and fell (pater noster qui es in inferno) and fell . . .

And soared! And caromed into the roaring flame! And fell. And saw death, suddenly, and came face to face with himself, and knew death intimately . . . and fell (Kill the criminal Daavye compassion compassion) and fell . . .

Trust me.

Falling, the voice embraced him. The voice sang through him. The voice made him tingle like a perfect harp-string, dispelling his terror in a moment. He was a nothing touched by love.

(Memories came like endless printouts but there was one memory on the verge of crystallizing, and he was waiting for it, waiting for it to come, clear as a presence—)

The voice was like homeworld. The roaring was the whisper of the sea. He could almost see his parents again: and fell and fell

and was touched by love and fell and lost consciousness, becoming one with an ineffable serenity.

"Answers! I want answers!" He woke, sweating, in the room in the twisted house. Ernad was there, and the whole family; he felt their concern, and then he broke down and sobbed violently, hopelessly.

"I think we deserve some answers too, Ton Davaryush," Ernad said softly; there was iron in his gentleness. (He heard the others whispering among themselves: "When he came back to the ship, he was in a trance, unconscious." "He's been like this for weeks.")

"Now understand this, Davaryush," said Ernad, "you are not the first Inquestor to visit our planet. And will not be the last either."

Davaryush did what he never dreamed he would do: between fits of weeping, he told them the whole story, how he had come to Shtoma to save its people from themselves, how he had been defeated, how he understood nothing now, nothing at all.

(They fed him with sweet *zul* and were so kind to him. This, too, evoked a strange wonder and respect in him; for he had wanted to betray them.)

"Well, you were promised an explanation. Listen, then: *Udara* is no ordinary star. Of course we didn't build him; that's ridiculous. But—do you know anything about the origins of sentience? Well, you know how life evolves: how certain arrangements of atoms, certain paradigms, created purely by chance interactions, you understand, becoming living beings, self-aware, sometimes . . . white dwarfs are created by incredible cataclysms, by a star going nova, dying . . . somehow, a spark of life was made, after the nova, and *udara* became self-aware. *Udara* is alive, Davaryush! and we have acquired a symbiotic relationship with him that permits us to exist in this scientifically anomalous state . . . do you follow? In the black boxes, Davaryush: pieces of the sun."

Davaryush lay back, stupefied, his thoughts fired by the incredible imagery of it.

"Did you imagine that mere people like we could create and uncreate gravitons and anti-gravitons? How much power is available, without the resources of a star? Could we make and unmake gravitational fields? Could we dim the sunlight on one area of the

sun, so as to be unharmed by its heat? *Udara* does all this, by his own will; his knowledge of physical laws is several orders beyond our understanding. We think that he is aware of himself, not only in this four-dimensional continuum, but also in other continua."

"But with this power," Davaryush said, "with this sun to do your bidding, can't you conquer the galaxy, win wars?"

"You still don't understand! The sun does not do our bidding; the sun does all this because he *loves* us." (Davaryush remembered, suddenly, how love had touched him when he was plummeting towards death.) "You felt it in the sunlight. You would always have felt it, but you were so full of confusion and contradiction, and so many people had lied to you . . . but when you fell into the sun, when you danced on the sun's face, then you understood. You see, we can't commit evil, because, in the act of dancing—what the rest of humanity thinks of as our little children's game—we have partaken of a tiny fragment of his nature . . .

"But let me plant a doubt in your *mind*. That is what you came to do to us, isn't it? Well: what if the Inquest existed, not for salvation, but for destruction? What if its sole purpose were to perpetrate its leaders' desire for conquest, and its mouthpieces, the "Inquestors," were simply indoctrinated with pseudoreligiousness to make them more fanatical, more serviceable? . . ."

And Davaryush knew that he had lost his faith. (He wondered what answer he would give them about Shtoma. It would probably be unsatisfactory; they would undoubtedly have to send another Inquestor. But he no longer cared what the Inquest thought.)

Finally there came a day when Alk came running in to him, breathlessly: "Your tachyon bubble, it's hovering above the house!"

He stepped outside. The sun shone on him, bathing him with inexpressible joy.

Suddenly the memory came to him, the memory that was just beginning to come to him, before he became unconscious—

He was six years old. The ship was waiting to take him to the war. He was standing there with his father, by the sea shore, and his father seized him, on impulse, and threw him into the air, and he screamed for help, half-laughing, and fell for an eternity, into the arms that were for him, for protecting him, for loving him.

At last he understood the love of *udara*.

. . . But the children of the house had come and were clustered around him, making much of him, and Ernad stood at the entrance, waving to him.

"Qithe qithembara!" he yelled frantically, forcing back his tears—

He took one more step towards the bubble.

You have danced on the face of the sun.

OPTIONS

by John Varley

There have been many books lately about sex change and many by changelings themselves about their lives as men and then as women . . . and occasionally the other way around. In every instance it would appear that the operation takes many painful months and sometimes years, that it is never truly complete, producing at best a reasonable "passing" facsimile of the new sex. This is not said in derogation of the "change"—quite clearly it is accepted in psychology as the best solution to a personal conflict with one's assigned gender role. But suppose that sex change is perfected, is made quick, total, and painless. What would be the effect on the society in which that could be a commonplace decision to any citizen? John Varley picks up the options. . . .

Cleo hated breakfast.

Her energy level was lowest in the morning, but not so the children's. There was always some school crisis, something that had to be located at the last minute, some argument that had to be settled.

This morning it was a bowl of cereal spilled in Lilli's lap. Cleo hadn't seen it happen; her attention had been diverted momentarily by Feather, her youngest.

And of course it had to happen *after* Lilli was dressed.

"Mom, this was the *last* outfit I *had.*"

"Well, if you wouldn't use them so hard they might last more than three days, and if you didn't . . ." She stopped before she lost her temper. "Just take it off and go as you are."

"But Mom, nobody goes to school naked. *No*body. Give me some money and I'll stop at the store on—"

Cleo raised her voice, something she tried never to do. "Child, I know there are kids in your class whose parents can't afford to buy clothes at all."

"All right, so the poor kids don't—"

"That's enough. You're late already. Get going."

Lilli stalked from the room. Cleo heard the door slam.

Through it all Jules was an island of calm at the other end of the table, his nose in his newspad, sipping his second cup of coffee. Cleo glanced at her own bacon and eggs cooling on the plate, poured herself a first cup of coffee, then had to get up and help Paul find his other shoe.

By then Feather was wet again, so she put her on the table and peeled off the sopping diaper.

"Hey, listen to this," Jules said. "'The City Council today passed without objection an ordinance requiring—'"

"Jules, aren't you a little behind schedule?"

He glanced at his thumbnail. "You're right. Thanks." He finished his coffee, folded his newspad and tucked it under his arm, bent over to kiss her, then frowned.

"You really ought to eat more, honey," he said, indicating the untouched eggs. "Eating for two, you know. 'By, now."

"Good-by," Cleo said, through clenched teeth. "And if I hear that 'eating for two' business again, I'll . . ." But he was gone.

She had time to scorch her lip on the coffee, then was out the door, hurrying to catch the train.

There were seats on the sun car, but of course Feather was with her and the UV wasn't good for her tender skin. After a longing look at the passengers reclining with the dark cups strapped over their eyes—and a rueful glance down at her own pale skin—Cleo boarded the next car and found a seat by a large man wearing a hardhat. She settled down in the cushions, adjusted the straps on the carrier slung in front of her, and let

Feather have a nipple. She unfolded her newspad and spread it out in her lap.

"Cute," the man said. "How old is he?"

"She," Cleo said, without looking up. "Eleven days." And five hours and thirty-six minutes. . . .

She shifted in the seat, pointedly turning her shoulder to him, and made a show of activating her newspad and scanning the day's contents. She did not glance up as the train left the underground tunnel and emerged on the gently rolling, airless plain of Mendeleev. There was little enough out there to interest her, considering she made the forty-minute commute run to Hartman crater twice a day. They had discussed moving to Hartman, but Jules liked living in King City near his work, and of course the kids would have missed all their school friends.

There wasn't much in the news storage that morning. She queried when the red light flashed for an update. The pad printed some routine city business. Three sentences into the story she punched the reject key.

There was an Invasion Centennial parade listed for 1900 hours that evening. Parades bored her, and so did the Centennial. If you've heard one speech about how liberation of Earth is just around the corner if we all pull together, you've heard them all. Semantic content zero, nonsense quotient high.

She glanced wistfully at sports, noting that the J Sector jumpball team was doing poorly in the intracity tournament without her. Cleo's small stature and powerful legs had served her well as a starting sprint-wing in her playing days, but it just didn't seem possible to make practices anymore.

As a last resort, she called up the articles, digests, and analysis listings, the newspad's *Sunday Supplement* and Op-Ed department. A title caught her eye, and she punched it up.

Changing: The Revolution in Sex Roles
(Or, Who's on Top?)

Twenty years ago, when cheap and easy sex changes first became available to the general public, it was seen as the beginning of the revolution that would change the shape of human society in ways impossible to foresee. Sexual equality is one thing, the sociologists pointed out, but certain residual

inequities—based on biological imperatives or on upbringing, depending on your politics—have proved impossible to weed out. Changing was going to end all that. Men and women would be able to see what it was like from the other side of the barrier that divides humanity. How could sex roles survive that?

Ten years later the answer was obvious. Changing had appealed to only a tiny minority. It was soon seen as a harmless aberration, practiced by only 1 per cent of the population. Everyone promptly forgot about the tumbling of barriers.

But in the intervening ten years a quieter revolution has been building. Almost unnoticed on the broad scale because it is an invisible phenomenon (how do you know the next woman you meet was not a man last week?), changing has been gaining growing, matter-of-fact acceptance among the children of the generation that rejected it. The chances are now better than even that you know someone who has had at least one sex change. The chances are better than one out of fifteen that you yourself have changed; if you are under twenty, the chance is one in three.

The article went on to describe the underground society which was springing up around changing. Changers tended to band together, frequenting their own taprooms, staging their own social events, remaining aloof from the larger society which many of them saw as outmoded and irrelevant. Changers tended to marry other changers. They divided the childbearing equally, each preferring to mother only one child. The author viewed this tendency with alarm, since it went against the socially approved custom of large families. Changers retorted that the time for that was past, pointing out that Luna had been tamed long ago. They quoted statistics proving that at present rates of expansion, Luna's population would be in the billions in an amazingly short time.

There were interviews with changers, and psychological profiles. Cleo read that the males had originally been the heaviest users of the new technology, stating sexual reasons for their decision, and the change had often been permanent. Today, the changer was slightly more likely to have been born female, and to give social reasons, the most common of which was pressure to

bear children. But the modern changer committed him/herself to neither role. The average time between changes in an individual was two years, and declining.

Cleo read the whole article, then thought about using some of the reading references at the end. Not that much of it was really new to her. She had been aware of changing, without thinking about it much. The idea had never attracted her, and Jules was against it. But for some reason it had struck a chord this morning.

Feather had gone to sleep. Cleo carefully pulled the blanket down around the child's face, then wiped milk from her nipple. She folded her newspad and stowed it in her purse, then rested her chin on her palm and looked out the window for the rest of the trip.

Cleo was chief on-site architect for the new Food Systems, Inc., plantation that was going down in Hartman. As such, she was in charge of three junior architects, five construction bosses, and an army of drafters and workers. It was a big project, the biggest Cleo had ever handled.

She liked her work, but the best part had always been being there on the site when things were happening, actually supervising construction instead of running a desk. That had been difficult in the last months of carrying Feather, but at least there were maternity pressure suits. It was even harder now.

She had been through it all before, with Lilli and Paul. Everybody works. That had been the rule for a century, since the Invasion. There was no labor to spare for baby-sitters, so having children meant the mother or father must do the same job they had been doing before, but do it while taking care of the child. In practice, it was usually the mother, since she had the milk.

Cleo had tried leaving Feather with one of the women in the office, but each had her own work to do, and not unreasonably felt Cleo should bear the burden of her own offspring. And Feather never seemed to respond well to another person. Cleo would return from her visit to the site to find the child had been crying the whole time, disrupting everyone's work. She had taken Feather in a crawler a few times, but it wasn't the same.

That morning was taken up with a meeting. Cleo and the other section chiefs sat around the big table for three hours,

discussing ways of dealing with the cost overrun, then broke for lunch only to return to the problem in the afternoon. Cleo's back was aching and she had a headache she couldn't shake, so Feather chose that day to be cranky. After ten minutes of increasingly hostile looks, Cleo had to retire to the booth with Leah Farnham, the accountant, and her three-year-old son, Eddie. The two of them followed the proceedings through earphones while trying to cope with their children and make their remarks through throat mikes. Half the people at the conference table either had to turn around when she spoke, or ignore her, and Cleo was hesitant to force them to that choice. As a result, she chose her remarks with extreme care. More often, she said nothing.

There was something at the core of the world of business that refused to adjust to children in the board room, while appearing to make every effort to accommodate the working mother. Cleo brooded about it, not for the first time.

But what did she want? Honestly, she could not see what else could be done. It certainly wasn't fair to disrupt the entire meeting with a crying baby. She wished she knew the answer. Those were her friends out there, yet her feeling of alienation was intense, staring through the glass wall that Eddie was smudging with his dirty fingers.

Luckily, Feather was a perfect angel on the trip home. She gurgled and smiled toothlessly at a woman who had stopped to admire her, and Cleo warmed to the infant for the first time that day. She spent the trip playing hand games with her, surrounded by the approving smiles of other passengers.

"Jules, I read the most interesting article on the pad this morning." There, it was out, anyway. She had decided the direct approach would be best.

"Hmm?"

"It was about changing. It's getting more and more popular."

"Is that so?" He did not look up from his book.

Jules and Cleo were in the habit of sitting up in bed for a few hours after the children were asleep. They spurned the video programs that were designed to lull workers after a hard day, preferring to use the time to catch up on reading, or to talk if either of them had anything to say. Over the last few years, they had read more and talked less.

Cleo reached over Feather's crib and got a packet of dope-sticks. She flicked one to light with her thumbnail, drew on it, and exhaled a cloud of lavender smoke. She drew her legs up under her and leaned back against the wall.

"I just thought we might talk about it. That's all."

Jules put his book down. "All right. But what's to talk about? We're not into that."

She shrugged and picked at a cuticle. "I know. We did talk about it, way back. I just wondered if you still felt the same, I guess." She offered him the stick and he took a drag.

"As far as I know, I do," he said easily. "It's not something I spend a great deal of thought on. What's the matter?" He looked at her suspiciously. "You weren't having any thoughts in that direction, were you?"

"Well, no, not exactly. No. But you really ought to read the article. More people are doing it. I just thought we ought to be aware of it."

"Yeah, I've heard that," Jules conceded. He laced his hands behind his head. "No way to tell unless you've worked with them and suddenly one day they've got a new set of equipment." He laughed. "First time it was sort of hard for me to get used to. Now I hardly think about it."

"Me, either."

"They don't cause any problem," Jules said with an air of finality. "Live and let live."

"Yeah." Cleo smoked in silence for a time and let Jules get back to his reading, but she still felt uncomfortable. "Jules?"

"What is it now?"

"Don't you ever wonder what it would be like?"

He sighed and closed his book, then turned to face her.

"I don't quite understand you tonight," he said.

"Well, maybe I don't, either, but we could talk—"

"Listen. Have you thought about what it would do to the kids? I mean, even if I was willing to seriously consider it, which I'm not."

"I talked to Lilli about that. Just theoretically, you understand. She said she has two teachers who change, and one of her best friends used to be a boy. There's quite a few kids at school who've changed. She takes it in stride."

"Yes, but she's older. What about Paul? What would it do to

his concept of himself as a young man? I'll tell you, Cleo, in the back of my mind I keep thinking this business is a little sick. I feel it would have a bad effect on the children."

"Not according to—"

"Cleo, Cleo. Let's not get into an argument. Number one, I have no intention of getting a change, now or in the future. Two, if only one of us was changed, it would sure play hell with our sex life, wouldn't it? And three, I like you too much as you are." He leaned over and began to kiss her.

She was more than a little annoyed, but said nothing as his kisses became more intense. It was a damnably effective way of shutting off debate. And she could not stay angry: she was responding in spite of herself, easily, naturally.

It was as good as it always was with Jules. The ceiling, so familiar, once again became a calming blankness that absorbed her thoughts.

No, she had no complaints about being female, no sexual dissatisfactions. It was nothing as simple as that.

Afterward she lay on her side with her legs drawn up, her knees together. She faced Jules, who absently stroked her leg with one hand. Her eyes were closed, but she was not sleepy. She was savoring the warmth she cherished so much after sex; the slipperiness between her legs, holding his semen inside.

She felt the bed move as he shifted his weight.

"You did make it, didn't you?"

She opened one eye enough to squint at him.

"Of course I did. I always do. You know I never have any trouble in that direction."

He relaxed back into the pillow. "I'm sorry for . . . well, for springing on you like that."

"It's okay. It was nice."

"I had just thought you might have been . . . faking it. I'm not sure why I would think that."

She opened the other eye and patted him gently on the cheek.

"Jules, I'd never be that protective of your poor ego. If you don't satisfy me, I promise you'll be the second to know."

He chuckled, then turned on his side to kiss her.

"Good night, babe."

"G'night."

She loved him. He loved her. Their sex life was good—with the

slight mental reservation that he always seemed to initiate it—and she was happy with her body.

So why was she still awake three hours later?

Shopping took a few hours on the vidphone Saturday morning. Cleo bought the household necessities for delivery that afternoon, then left the house to do the shopping she fancied: going from store to store, looking at things she didn't really need.

Feather was with Jules on Saturdays. She savored a quiet lunch alone at a table in the park plaza, then found herself walking down Brazil Avenue in the heart of the medical district. On impulse, she stepped into the New Heredity Body Salon.

It was only after she was inside that she admitted to herself she had spent most of the morning arranging for the impulse.

She was on edge as she was taken down a hallway to a consulting room, and had to force a smile for the handsome young man behind the desk. She sat, put her packages on the floor, and folded her hands in her lap. He asked what he could do for her.

"I'm not actually here for any work," she said. "I wanted to look into the costs, and maybe learn a little more about the procedures involved in changing."

He nodded understandingly, and got up.

"There's no charge for the initial consultation," he said. "We're happy to answer your questions. By the way, I'm Marion, spelled with an 'O' this month." He smiled at her and motioned for her to follow him. He stood her in front of a full-length mirror mounted on the wall.

"I know it's hard to make that first step. It was hard for me, and I do it for a living. So we've arranged this demonstration that won't cost you anything, either in money or worry. It's a nonthreatening way to see some of what it's all about, but it might startle you a little, so be prepared." He touched a button in the wall beside the mirror, and Cleo saw her clothes fade away. She realized it was not really a mirror, but a holographic screen linked to a computer.

The computer introduced changes in the image. In thirty seconds she faced a male stranger. There was no doubt the face was her own, but it was more angular, perhaps a little larger in its underlying bony structure. The skin on the stranger's jaw was rough, as if it needed shaving.

The rest of the body was as she might expect, though overly

muscled for her tastes. She did little more than glance at the penis; somehow that didn't seem to matter so much. She spent more time studying the hair on the chest, the tiny nipples, and the ridges that had appeared on the hands and feet. The image mimicked her every movement.

"Why all the brawn?" she asked Marion. "If you're trying to sell me on this, you've taken the wrong approach."

Marion punched some more buttons. "I didn't choose this image," he explained. "The computer takes what it sees, and extrapolates. You're more muscular than the average woman. You probably exercise. This is what a comparable amount of training would have produced with male hormones to fix nitrogen in the muscles. But we're not bound by that."

The image lost about eight kilos of mass, mostly in the shoulders and thighs. Cleo felt a little more comfortable, but still missed the smoothness she was accustomed to seeing in her mirror.

She turned from the display and went back to her chair. Marion sat across from her and folded his hands on the desk.

"Basically, what we do is produce a cloned body from one of your own cells. Through a process called Y-Recombinant Viral Substitution we remove one of your X chromosomes and replace it with a Y.

"The clone is forced to maturity in the usual way, which takes about six months. After that, it's just a simple non-rejection-hazard brain transplant. You walk in as a woman, and leave an hour later as a man. Easy as that."

Cleo said nothing, wondering again what she was doing here.

"From there we can modify the body. We can make you taller or shorter, rearrange your face, virtually anything you like." He raised his eyebrows, then smiled ruefully and spread his hands.

"All right, Ms. King," he said. "I'm not trying to pressure you. You'll need to think about it. In the meantime, there's a process that would cost you very little, and might be just the thing to let you test the waters. Am I right in thinking your husband opposes this?"

She nodded, and he looked sympathetic.

"Not uncommon, not uncommon at all," he assured her. "It brings out castration fears in men who didn't even suspect they had them. Of course, we do nothing of the sort. His male body

would be kept in a tank, ready for him to move back whenever he wanted to."

Cleo shifted in her chair. "What was this process you were talking about?"

"Just a bit of minor surgery. It can be done in ten minutes, and corrected in the same time before you even leave the office if you find you don't care for it. It's a good way to get husbands thinking about changing; sort of a signal you can send him. You've heard of the androgenous look. It's in all the fashion tapes. Many women, especially if they have large breasts like you do, find it an interesting change."

"You say it's cheap? And reversible?"

"All our processes are reversible. Changing the size or shape of breasts is our most common body operation."

Cleo sat on the examining table while the attendant gave her a quick physical.

"I don't know if Marion realized you're nursing," the woman said. "Are you sure this is what you want?"

How the hell should I know? Cleo thought. She wished the feeling of confusion and uncertainty would pass.

"Just do it."

Jules hated it.

He didn't yell or slam doors or storm out of the house; that had never been his style. He voices his objections coldly and quietly at the dinner table, after saying practically nothing since she walked in the door.

"I just would like to know why you thought you should do this without even talking to me about it. I don't demand that you *ask* me, just discuss it with me."

Cleo felt miserable, but was determined not to let it show. She held Feather in her arm, the bottle in her hand, and ignored the food cooling on her plate. She was hungry but at least she was not eating for two.

"Jules, I'd ask you before I rearranged the furniture. We both own this apartment. I'd ask you before I put Lilli or Paul in another school. We share the responsibility for their upbringing. But I don't ask you when I put on lipstick or cut my hair. It's my body."

"I like it, Mom," Lilli said. "You look like me."

Cleo smiled at her, reached over and tousled her hair.

"What do you like?" Paul asked, around a mouthful of food.

"See?" said Cleo. "It's not that important."

"I don't see how you can say that. And I said you didn't have to ask me. I just would . . . you should have . . . I should have *known.*"

"It was an impulse, Jules."

"An impulse. An *impulse.*" For the first time, he raised his voice, and Cleo knew how upset he really was. Lilli and Paul fell silent, and even Feather squirmed.

But Cleo liked it. Oh, not forever and ever: as an interesting change. It gave her a feeling of freedom to be that much in control of her body, to be able to decide how large she wished her breasts to be. Did it have anything to do with changing? She really didn't think so. She didn't feel the least bit like a man.

And what was a breast, anyway? It was anything from a nipple sitting flush with the rib cage to a mammoth hunk of fat and milk gland. Cleo realized Jules was suffering from the more-is-better syndrome, thinking of Cleo's action as the removal of her breasts, as if they had to be large to exist at all. What she had actually done was reduce their size.

No more was said at the table, but Cleo knew it was for the children's sake. As soon as they got into bed, she could feel the tension again.

"I can't understand why you did it *now*. What about Feather?"

"What about her?"

"Well, do you expect me to nurse her?"

Cleo finally got angry. "Damn it, that's *exactly* what I expect you to do. Don't tell me you don't know what I'm talking about. You think it's all fun and games, having to carry a child around all day because she needs the milk in your breasts?"

"You never complained before."

"I . . ." She stopped. He was right, of course. It amazed even Cleo that this had all come up so suddenly, but here it was, and she had to deal with it. *They* had to deal with it.

"That's because it isn't an awful thing. It's great to nourish another human being at your breast. I loved every minute of it with Lilli. Sometimes it was a headache, having her there all the time, but it was worth it. The same with Paul." She sighed. "The same with Feather, too, most of the time. You hardly think about it."

"Then why the revolt, now? With no warning?"

"It's not a revolt, honey. Do you see it as that? I just . . . I'd like you to try it. Take Feather for a few months. Take her to work like I do. Then you'd . . . you'd see a little of what I go through." She rolled on her side and playfully punched his arm, trying to lighten it in some way. "You might even like it. It feels real good."

He snorted. "I'd feel silly."

She jumped from the bed and paced toward the living room, then turned, more angry than ever. "Silly? Nursing is silly? Breasts are silly? Then why the hell do you wonder why I did what I did?"

"Being a *man* is what makes it silly," he retorted. "It doesn't look right. I almost laugh every time I see a man with breasts. The hormones mess up your system, I heard, and—"

"That's *not true!* Not anymore. You can lactate—"

"—and besides, it's my body, as you pointed out. I'll do with it what pleases me."

She sat on the edge of the bed with her back to him. He reached out and stroked her, but she moved away.

"All right," she said. "I was just suggesting it. I thought you might like to try it. *I'm* not going to nurse her. She goes on the bottle from now on."

"If that's the way it has to be."

"It is. I want you to start taking Feather to work with you. Since she's going to be a bottle baby, it hardly matters which of us cares for her. I think you owe it to me, since I carried the burden alone with Lilli and Paul."

"All right."

She got into bed and pulled the covers up around her, her back to him. She didn't want him to see how close she was to tears.

But the feeling passed. The tension drained from her, and she felt good. She thought she had won a victory, and it was worth the cost. Jules would not stay angry at her.

She fell asleep easily, but woke up several times during the night as Jules tossed and turned.

He did adjust to it. It was impossible for him to say so all at once, but after a week without love-making he admitted grudgingly that she looked good. He began to touch her in the mornings and when they kissed after getting home from work. Jules had always admired her slim muscularity, her athlete's arms and

legs. The slim chest looked so natural on her, it fit the rest of her so well that he began to wonder what all the fuss had been about.

One night while they were clearing the dinner dishes, Jules touched her nipples for the first time in a week. He asked her if it felt any different.

"There is very little feeling anywhere but the nipples," she pointed out, "no matter how big a woman is. You know that."

"Yeah, I guess I do."

She knew they would make love that night and determined it would be on her terms.

She spent a long time in the bathroom, letting him get settled with his book, then came out and took it away. She got on top of him and pressed close, kissing and tickling his nipples with her fingers.

She was aggressive and insistent. At first he seemed reluctant, but soon he was responding as she pressed her lips hard against his, forcing his head back into the pillow.

"I love you," he said, and raised his head to kiss her nose. "Are you ready?"

"I'm ready." He put his arms around her and held her close, then rolled over and hovered above her.

"Jules. *Jules.* Stop it." She squirmed onto her side, her legs held firmly together.

"What's wrong?"

"I want to be on top tonight."

"Oh. All right." He turned over again and reclined passively as she repositioned herself. Her heart was pounding. There had been no reason to think he would object—they had made love in any and all positions, but basically the exotic ones were a change of pace from the "natural" one with her on her back. Tonight she had wanted to feel in control.

"Open your legs, darling," she said, with a smile. He did, but didn't return the smile. She raised herself on her hands and knees and prepared for the tricky insertion.

"Cleo."

"What is it? This will take a little effort, but I think I can make it worth your while, so if you'd just—"

"Cleo, what the hell is the purpose of this?"

She stopped dead and let her head sag between her shoulders.

"What's the matter? Are you feeling silly with your feet in the air?"

"Maybe. Is that what you wanted?"

"Jules, humiliating you was the farthest thing from my mind."

"Then what *was* on your mind? It's not like we've never done it this way before. It's—"

"Only when *you* chose to do so. It's always your decision."

"It's not degrading to be on the bottom."

"Then why were you feeling silly?"

He didn't answer, and she wearily lifted herself away from him, sitting on her knees at his feet. She waited, but he didn't seem to want to talk about it.

"I've never complained about that position," she ventured. "I don't *have* any complaints about it. It works pretty well." Still he said nothing. "All right. I wanted to see what it looked like from up there. I was tired of looking at the ceiling. I was curious."

"And *that's* why I felt *silly*. I never minded you being on top before, have I? But before . . . well, it's never been in the context of the last couple weeks. I *know* what's on your mind."

"And you feel threatened by it. By the fact that I'm curious about changing, that I want to know what it's like to take charge. You know I can't—and wouldn't if I could—force a change on you."

"But your curiosity is wrecking our marriage."

She felt like crying again, but didn't let it show except for a trembling of her lower lip. She didn't want him to try and soothe her; that was all too likely to work, and she would find herself on her back with her legs in the air. She looked down at the bed and nodded slowly, then got up. She went to the mirror and took the brush, began running it through her hair.

"What are you doing now? Can't we talk about this?"

"I don't feel much like talking right now." She leaned forward and examined her face as she brushed, then dabbed at the corners of her eyes with a tissue. "I'm going out. I'm still curious."

He said nothing as she started for the door.

"I may be a little late."

The place was called Oophyte. The capital "O" had a plus sign hanging from it, and an arrow in the upper right side. The sign was built so that the symbols revolved; one moment the plus was inside and the arrow out, the next moment the reverse.

Cleo moved in a pleasant haze across the crowded dance floor, pausing now and then to draw on her dopestick. The air in

the room was thick with lavender smoke, illuminated by flashing blue lights. She danced when the mood took her. The music was so loud that she didn't have to think about it; the noise gripped her bones and animated her arms and legs. She glided through a forest of naked skin, feeling the occasional roughness of a paper suit and, rarely, expensive cotton clothing. It was like moving underwater, like wading through molasses.

She saw him across the floor and began moving in his direction. He took no notice of her for some time, though she danced right in front of him. Few of the dancers had partners in more than the transitory sense. Some were celebrating life, others were displaying themselves, but all were looking for partners, so eventually he realized she had been there an unusual length of time. He was easily as stoned as she was.

She told him what she wanted.

"Sure. Where do you want to go? Your place?"

She took him down the hall in back and touched her credit bracelet to the lock on one of the doors. The room was simple, but clean.

He looked a lot like her phantom twin in the mirror, she noted with one part of her mind. It was probably why she had chosen him. She embraced him and lowered him gently to the bed.

"Do you want to exchange names?" he asked. The grin on his face kept getting sillier as she toyed with him.

"I don't care. Mostly I think I want to use you."

"Use away. My name's Saffron."

"I'm Cleopatra. Would you get on your back, please?"

He did, and they did. It was hot in the little room, but neither of them minded it. It was healthy exertion, the physical sensations were great, and when Cleo was through she had learned nothing. She collapsed on top of him. He did not seem surprised when tears began falling on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she said, sitting up and getting ready to leave.

"Don't go," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. "Now that you've got that out of your system, maybe we can make love."

She didn't want to smile, but she had to, then she was crying harder, putting her face to his chest and feeling the warmth of his arms around her and the hair tickling her nose. She realized what she was doing, and tried to pull away.

"For God's sake, don't be ashamed that you need someone to cry on."

"It's weak. I . . . I just didn't want to be weak."

"We're all weak."

She gave up struggling and nestled there until the tears stopped. She sniffed, wiped her nose, and faced him.

"What's it like? Can you tell me?" She was about to explain what she meant, but he seemed to understand.

"It's like . . . nothing special."

"You were born female, weren't you? I mean, you . . . I thought I might be able to tell."

"It's no longer important how I was born. I've been both. It's still me, on the inside. You understand?"

"I'm not sure I do."

They were quiet for a long time. Cleo thought of a thousand things to say, questions to ask, but could do nothing.

"You've been coming to a decision, haven't you?" he said, at last. "Are you any closer after tonight?"

"I'm not sure."

"It's not going to solve any problems, you know. It might even create some."

She pulled away from him and got up. She shook her hair and wished for a comb.

"Thank you, Cleopatra," he said.

"Oh. Uh, thank you . . ." She had forgotten his name. She smiled again to cover her embarrassment, and shut the door behind her.

"Hello?"

"Yes. This is Cleopatra King. I had a consultation with one of your staff. I believe it was ten days ago."

"Yes, Ms. King. I have your file. What can I do for you?"

She took a deep breath. "I want you to start the clone. I left a tissue sample."

"Very well, Ms. King. Did you have any instructions concerning the chromosome donor?"

"Do you need consent?"

"Not as long as there's a sample in the bank."

"Use my husband, Jules La Rhin. Security number 4454390."

"Very good. We'll be in contact with you."

Cleo hung up the phone and rested her forehead against the cool metal. She should never get this stoned, she realized. What had she done?

But it was not final. It would be six months before she had to decide if she would ever use the clone. Damn Jules. Why did he have to make such a big thing out of it?

Jules did *not* make a big thing of it when she told him what she had done. He took it quietly and calmly, as if he had been expecting it.

"You know I won't follow you in this?"

"I know you feel that way. I'm interested to see if you change your mind."

"Don't count on it. I want to see if you change yours."

"I haven't *made up* my mind. But I'm giving myself the option."

"All I ask is that you bear in mind what this could do to our relationship. I love you, Cleo. I don't think that will ever change. But if you walk into this house as a man, I don't think I'll be able to see you as the person I've always loved."

"You could if you were a woman."

"But I won't be."

"And I'll be the same person I always was." But would she be? What the hell was *wrong?* What had Jules ever done that he should deserve this? She made up her mind never to go through with it, and they made love that night and it was very, very good.

But somehow she never got around to calling the vivarium and telling them to abort the clone. She made the decision not to go through with it a dozen times over the next six months, and never had the clone destroyed.

Their relationship in bed became uneasy as time passed. At first, it was good. Jules made no objections when she initiated sex, and was willing to do it any way she preferred. Once that was accomplished she no longer cared whether she was on top or underneath. The important thing had been having the option of making love when she wanted to, the way she wanted to.

"That's what this is all about," she told him one night, in a moment of clarity when everything seemed to make sense except his refusal to see things from her side. "It's the option I want. I'm not unhappy being female. I don't like the feeling that there's *anything* I *can't* be. I want to know if I feel more secure being ag-

gressive as a man, because I sure don't, most of the time, as a woman. Or do men feel the same insecurities I feel? Would Cleo the man feel free to cry? I don't know any of those things."

"But you said it yourself. You'll still be the same person."

They began to drift apart in small ways. A few weeks after her outing to the Oophyte she returned home one Sunday afternoon to find him in bed with a woman. It was not like him to do it like that; their custom had been to bring lovers home and introduce them, to keep it friendly and open. Cleo was amused, because she saw it as his way of getting back at her for her trip to the encounter bar.

So she was the perfect hostess, joining them in bed, which seemed to disconcert Jules. The woman's name was Harriet, and Cleo found herself liking her. She was a changer—something Jules had not known or he certainly would not have chosen her to make Cleo feel bad. Harriet was uncomfortable when she realized why she was there. Cleo managed to put her at ease by making love to her, something that surprised Cleo a little and Jules considerably, since she had never done it before.

Cleo enjoyed it; she found Harriet's smooth body to be a whole new world. And she felt she had neatly turned the tables on Jules, making him confront once more the idea of his wife in the man's role.

The worst part was the children. They had discussed the possible impending change with Lilli and Paul.

Lilli could not see what all the fuss was about; it was a part of her life, something that was all around her which she took for granted as something she herself would do when she was old enough. But when she began picking up the concern from her father, she drew subtly closer to her mother. Cleo was tremendously relieved. She didn't think she could have held to it in the face of Lilli's displeasure. Lilli was her first born, and though she hated to admit it and did her best not to play favorites, her darling. She had taken a year's leave from her job at appalling expense to the household budget so she could devote all her time to her infant daughter. She often wished she could somehow return to those simpler days, when motherhood had been her whole life.

Feather, of course, was not consulted. Jules had assumed the responsibility for her nurture without complaint, and seemed to be enjoying it. It was fine with Cleo, though it maddened her that

he was so willing about taking over the mothering role without being willing to try it as a female. Cleo loved Feather as much as the other two, but sometimes had trouble recalling why they had decided to have her. She felt she had gotten the procreation impulse out of her system with Paul, and yet there Feather was.

Paul was the problem.

Things could get tense when Paul expressed doubts about how he would feel if his mother were to become a man. Jules's face would darken, and he might not speak for days. When he did speak, often in the middle of the night when neither of them could sleep, it would be in a verbal explosion that was as close to violence as she had ever seen him.

It frightened her, because she was by no means sure of herself when it came to Paul. Would it hurt him? Jules spoke of gender identity crises, of the need for stable role models, and finally, in naked honesty, of the fear that his son would grow up to be somehow less than a man.

Cleo didn't know, but cried herself to sleep over it many nights. They had read articles about it and found that psychologists were divided. Traditionalists made much of the importance of sex roles, while changers felt sex roles were important only to those who were trapped in them; with the breaking of the sexual barrier, the concept of roles vanished.

The day finally came when the clone body was ready. Cleo still did not know what she should do.

"Are you feeling comfortable now? Just nod if you can't talk."

"Wha . . ."

"Relax. It's all over. You'll be feeling like walking in a few minutes. We'll have someone take you home. You may feel drunk for a while, but there's no drugs in your system."

"Wha' . . . happen?"

"It's over. Just relax."

Cleo did, curling up in a ball. Eventually he began to laugh.

Drunk was not the word for it. He sprawled on the bed, trying on pronouns for size. It was all so funny. *He* was on *his* back with *his* hands in *his* lap. He giggled and rolled back and forth, over and over, fell on the floor in hysterics.

He raised his head.

"Is that you, Jules?"

"Yes, it's me." He helped Cleo back onto the bed, then sat on the edge, not too near, but not unreachably far away. "How do you feel?"

He snorted. "Drunker 'n a skunk." He narrowed his eyes, forced them to focus on Jules. "You must call me Leo now. Cleo is a woman's name. You shouldn't have called me Cleo then."

"All right. I didn't call you Cleo, though."

"You didn't? Are you *sure?*"

"I'm very sure it's something I wouldn't have said."

"Oh. Okay." He lifted his head and looked confused for a moment. "You know what? I'm gonna be sick."

Leo felt much better an hour later. He sat in the living room with Jules, both of them on the big pillows that were the only furniture.

They spoke of inconsequential matters for a time, punctuated by long silences. Leo was no more used to the sound of his new voice than Jules was.

"Well," Jules said, finally, slapping his hands on his knees and standing up. "I really don't know what your plans are from here. Did you want to go out tonight? Find a woman, see what it's like?"

Leo shook his head. "I tried that out as soon as I got home," he said. "The male orgasm, I mean."

"What was it like?"

He laughed. "Certainly you know that by now."

"No, I meant, after being a woman—"

"I know what you mean." He shrugged. "The erection is interesting. So much larger than what I'm used to. Otherwise . . ." He frowned for a moment. "A lot the same. Some different. More localized. Messier."

"Um." Jules looked away, studying the electric fireplace as if seeing it for the first time. "Had you planned to move out? It isn't necessary, you know. We could move people around. I can go in with Paul, or we could move him in with me in . . . in our old room. You could have his." He turned away from Leo, and put his hand to his face.

Leo ached to get up and comfort him, but felt it would be exactly the wrong thing to do. He let Jules get himself under control.

"If you'll have me, I'd like to continue sleeping with you."

Jules said nothing, and didn't turn around.

"Jules, I'm perfectly willing to do whatever will make you most comfortable. There doesn't have to be any sex. Or I'd be happy to do what I used to do when I was in late pregnancy. You wouldn't have to do anything at all."

"No sex," he said.

"Fine, fine. Jules, I'm getting awfully tired. Are you ready to sleep?"

There was a long pause, then he turned and nodded.

They lay quietly, side by side, not touching. The lights were out; Leo could barely see the outline of Jules's body.

After a long time, Jules turned on his side.

"Cleo, are you in there? Do you still love me?"

"I'm here," he said. "I love you. I always will."

Jules jumped when Leo touched him, but made no objection. He began to cry, and Leo held him close. They fell asleep in each other's arms.

The Oophyte was as full and noisy as ever. It gave Leo a headache.

He did not like the place any more than Cleo had, but it was the only place he knew to find sex partners quickly and easily, with no emotional entanglements and no long process of seduction. Everyone there was available; all one needed to do was ask. They used each other for sexual calisthenics just one step removed from masturbation, cheerfully admitted the fact, and took the position that if you didn't approve, what were you doing there? There were plenty of other places for romance and relationships.

Leo didn't normally approve of it—not for himself, though he cared not at all what other people did for amusement. He preferred to know someone he bedded.

But he was here tonight to learn. He felt he needed the practice. He did not buy the argument that he would know just what to do because he had been a woman and knew what they liked. He needed to know how people reacted to him as a male.

Things went well. He approached three women and was accepted each time. The first was a mess—so *that's* what they meant by too soon!—and she was rather indignant about it until he explained his situation. After that she was helpful and supportive.

He was about to leave when he was propositioned by a woman who said her name was Lynx. He was tired, but decided to go with her.

Ten frustrating minutes later she sat up and moved away from him. "What are you here for, if that's all the interest you can muster? And don't tell me it's my fault."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I forgot. I thought I would . . . well, I didn't realize I had to be really interested before I could perform."

"Perform? That's a funny way to put it."

"I'm sorry." He told her what the problem was, how many times he had made love in the last two hours. She sat on the edge of the bed and ran her hands through her hair, frustrated and irritable.

"Well, it's not the end of the world. There's plenty more out there. But you could give a girl a warning. You didn't have to say yes back there."

"I know. It's my fault. I'll have to learn to judge my capacity, I guess. It's just that I'm used to being *able* to, even if I'm not particularly—"

Lynx laughed. "What am I saying? Listen to me. Honey, I used to have the same problem myself. *Weeks* of not getting it up. And I know it hurts."

"Well," Leo said, "I know what you're feeling like, too. It's no fun."

Lynx shrugged. "In other circumstances, yeah. But like I said, the woods are full of 'em tonight. I won't have any problem." She put her hand on his cheek and pouted at him. "Hey, I didn't hurt your poor male ego, did I?"

Leo thought about it, probed around for bruises, and found none.

"No."

She laughed. "I didn't think so. Because you don't have one. Enjoy it, Leo. A male ego is something that has to be grown carefully, when you're young. People have to keep pointing out what you have to do to be a man, so you can recognize failure when you can't 'perform.' How come you used that word?"

"I don't know. I guess I was just thinking of it that way."

"Trying to be a quote *man* unquote. Leo, you don't have enough emotional investment in it. And you're *lucky*. It took me

over a year to shake mine. Don't be a man. Be a male human, instead. The switchover's a lot easier that way."

"I'm not sure what you mean."

She patted his knee. "Trust me. Do you see me getting all upset because I wasn't sexy enough to turn you on, or some such garbage? No. I wasn't brought up to worry that way. But reverse it. If I'd done to you what you just did to me, wouldn't something like that have occurred to you?"

"I think it would. Though I've always been pretty secure in that area."

"The most secure of us are whimpering children beneath it, at least some of the time. You understand that I got upset because you said yes when you weren't ready? And that's *all* I was upset about? It was impolite, Leo. A male human shouldn't do that to a female human. With a man and a woman, it's different. The poor fellow's got a lot of junk in his head, and so does the woman, so they shouldn't be held responsible for the tricks their egos play on them."

Leo laughed. "I don't know if you're making sense at all. But I like the sound of it. 'Male human.' Maybe I'll see the difference one day."

Some of the expected problems never developed.

Paul barely noticed the change. Leo had prepared himself for a traumatic struggle with his son, and it never came. If it changed Paul's life at all, it was in the fact that he could now refer to his maternal parent as Leo instead of mother.

Strangely enough, it was Lilli who had the most trouble at first. Leo was hurt by it, tried not to show it, and did everything he could to let her adjust gradually. Finally she came to him one day about a week after the change. She said she had been silly, and wanted to know if she could get a change, too, since one of her best friends was getting one. Leo talked her into remaining female until after the onset of puberty. He told her he thought she might enjoy it.

Leo and Jules circled each other like two tigers in a cage, unsure if a fight was necessary but ready to start clawing out eyes if it came to it. Leo didn't like the analogy; if he had still been a female tiger, he would have felt sure of the outcome. But he had no wish to engage in a dominance struggle with Jules.

They shared an apartment, a family, and a bed. They were

elaborately polite, but touched each other only rarely, and Leo always felt he should apologize when they did. Jules would not meet his eyes; their gazes would touch, then rebound like two cork balls with identical static charges.

But eventually Jules accepted Leo. He was "that guy who's always around" in Jules's mind. Leo didn't care for that, but saw it as progress. In a few more days Jules began to discover that he liked Leo. They began to share things, to talk more. The subject of their previous relationship was taboo for a while. It was as if Jules wanted to know Leo from scratch, not acknowledging there had ever been a Cleo who had once been his wife.

It wasn't that simple; Leo would not let it be. Jules sometimes sounded like he was mourning the passing of a loved one when he hesitantly began talking about the hurt inside him. He was able to talk freely to Leo, and it was in a slightly different manner from the way he had talked to Cleo. He poured out his soul. It was astonishing to Leo that there were so many bruises on it, so many defenses and insecurities. There was buried hostility which Jules had never felt free to tell a woman.

Leo let him go on, but when Jules started a sentence with, "I could never tell this to Cleo," or, "Now that she's gone," Leo would go to him, take his hand, and force him to look.

"I'm Cleo," he would say. "I'm right here, and I love you."

They started doing things together. Jules took him to places Cleo had never been. They went out drinking together and had a wonderful time getting sloshed. Before, it had always been dinner with a few drinks or dopesticks, then a show or concert. Now they might come home at 0200, harmonizing loud enough to get thrown in jail. Jules admitted he hadn't had so much fun since his college days.

Socializing was a problem. Few of their old friends were changers, and neither of them wanted to face the complications of going to a party as a couple. They couldn't make friends among changers, because Jules correctly saw he would be seen as an outsider.

So they saw a lot of men. Leo had thought he knew all of Jules's close friends, but found he had been wrong. He saw a side of Jules he had never seen before: more relaxed in ways, some of his guardedness gone, but with other defenses in place. Leo sometimes felt like a spy, looking in on a stratum of society he had always known was there, but had never been able to penetrate. If

Cleo had walked into the group its structure would have changed subtly; she would have created a new milieu by her presence, like light destroying the atom it was meant to observe.

After his initial outing to the Oophyte, Leo remained celibate for a long time. He did not want to have sex casually; he wanted to love Jules. As far as he knew, Jules was abstaining, too.

But they found an acceptable alternative in double-dating. They shopped around together for a while, taking out different women and having a lot of fun without getting into sex, until each settled on a woman he could have a relationship with. Jules was with Diane, a woman he had known at work for many years. Leo went out with Harriet.

The four of them had great times together. Leo loved being a pal to Jules, but would not let it remain simply that. He took to reminding Jules that he could do this with Cleo, too. What Leo wanted to emphasize was that he could be a companion, a buddy, a confidant no matter which sex he was. He wanted to combine the best of being a woman and being a man, be both things for Jules, fulfill all his needs. But it hurt to think that Jules would not do the same for him.

"Well, hello, Leo. I didn't expect to see you today."

"Can I come in, Harriet?"

She held the door open for him.

"Can I get you anything? Oh, yeah, before you go any further, that 'Harriet' business is finished. I changed my name today. It's Joule from now on. That's spelled j-o-u-l-e."

"Okay, Joule. Nothing for me, thanks." He sat on her couch.

Leo was not surprised at the new name. Changers had a tendency to get away from "name" names. Some did as Cleo had done by choosing a gender equivalent or a similar sound. Others ignored gender connotations and used the one they had always used. But most eventually chose a neutral word, according to personal preference.

"Jules, Julia," he muttered.

"What was that?" Joule's brow wrinkled slightly. "Did you come here for mothering? Things going badly?"

Leo slumped down and contemplated his folded hands.

"I don't know. I guess I'm depressed. How long has it been now? Five months? I've learned a lot, but I'm not sure just what it is. I feel like I've grown. I see the world . . . well, I see things differently, yes. But I'm still basically the same person."

"In the sense that you're the same person at thirty-three as you were at ten?"

Leo squirmed. "Okay. Yeah, I've changed. But it's not any kind of reversal. Nothing turned topsy-turvy. It's an expansion. It's not a new viewpoint. It's like filling something up, moving out into unused spaces. Becoming . . ." His hands groped in the air, then fell back into his lap. "It's like a completion."

Joule smiled. "And you're disappointed? What more could you ask?"

Leo didn't want to get into that just yet. "Listen to this, and see if you agree. I always saw male and female—whatever that is, and I don't know if the two *really* exist other than physically and don't think it's important anyway. . . . I saw those qualities as separate. Later, I thought of them like Siamese twins in everybody's head. But the twins were usually fighting, trying to cut each other off. One would beat the other down, maim it, throw it in a cell, and never feed it, but they were always connected and the beaten-down one would make the winner pay for the victory.

"So I wanted to try and patch things up between them. I thought I'd just introduce them to each other and try to referee, but they got along a lot better than I expected. In fact, they turned into one whole person, and found they could be very happy together. I can't tell them apart any more. Does that make any sense?"

Joule moved over to sit beside him.

"It's a good analogy, in its way. I feel something like that, but I don't think about it anymore. So what's the problem? You just told me you feel whole now."

Leo's face contorted. "Yes, I do. And if I am, what does that make Jules?" He began to cry, and Joule let him get it out, just holding his hand. She thought he'd better face it alone, this time. When he had calmed down, she began to speak quietly.

"Leo, Jules is happy as he is. I think he could be much happier, but there's no way for us to show him that without having him do something that he fears so much. It's possible that he will do it someday, after more time to get used to it. And it's possible that he'll hate it and run screaming back to his manhood. Sometimes the maimed twin can't be rehabilitated."

She sighed heavily, and got up to pace the room.

"There's going to be a lot of this in the coming years," she said. "A lot of broken hearts. We're not really very much like them,

you know. We get along better. We're not angels, but we may be the most civilized, considerate group the race has yet produced. There are fools and bastards among us, just like the one-sexers, but I think we tend to be a little less foolish, and a little less cruel. I think changing is here to stay.

"And what you've got to realize is that you're lucky. And so is Jules. It could have been much worse. I know of several broken homes just among my own friends. There's going to be many more before society has assimilated this. But your love for Jules and his for you has held you together. He's made a tremendous adjustment, maybe as big as the one you made. He *likes* you. In either sex. Okay, so you don't make love to him as Leo. You may never reach that point."

"We did. Last night." Leo shifted on the couch. "I . . . I got mad. I told him if he wanted to see Cleo, he had to learn to relate to me, because I'm *me,* dammit."

"I think that might have been a mistake."

Leo looked away from her. "I'm starting to think so, too."

"But I think the two of you can patch it up, if there's any damage. You've come through a lot together."

"I didn't mean to force anything on him, I just got mad."

"And maybe you *should* have. It might have been just the thing. You'll have to wait and see."

Leo wiped his eyes and stood up.

"Thanks, Harr . . . sorry. Joule. You've helped me. I . . . uh, I may not be seeing you as often for a while."

"I understand. Let's stay friends, okay?" She kissed him, and he hurried away.

She was sitting on a pillow facing the door when he came home from work, her legs crossed, elbow resting on her knee with a dopestick in her hand. She smiled at him.

"Well, you're home early. What happened?"

"I stayed home from work." She nearly choked, trying not to laugh. He threw his coat to the closet and hurried into the kitchen. She heard something being stirred, then the sound of glass shattering. He burst through the doorway.

"Cleo!"

"Darling, you look so handsome with your mouth hanging open."

He shut it, but still seemed unable to move. She went to him,

feeling tingling excitement in her loins like the return of an old friend. She put his arms around her, and he nearly crushed her. She loved it.

He drew back slightly and couldn't seem to get enough of her face, his eyes roaming every detail.

"How long will you stay this way?" he asked. "Do you have any idea?"

"I don't know. Why?"

He smiled, a little sheepishly. "I hope you won't take this wrong. I'm so *happy* to see you. Maybe I shouldn't say it . . . but no, I think I'd better. I like Leo. I think I'll miss him, a little."

She nodded. "I'm not hurt. How could I be?" She drew away and led him to a pillow. "Sit down, Jules. We have to have a talk." His knees gave way under him and he sat, looking up expectantly.

"Leo isn't gone, and don't you ever think that for a minute. He's right here." She thumped her chest and looked at him defiantly. "He'll always be here. He'll never go away."

"I'm sorry, Cleo, I—"

"No, don't talk yet. It was my own fault, but I didn't know any better. I never should have called myself Leo. It gave you an easy out. You didn't have to face Cleo being a male. I'm changing all that. My name is Nile. N-i-l-e. I won't answer to anything else."

"All right. It's a nice name."

"I thought of calling myself Lion. For Leo the lion. But I decided to be who I always was, the queen of the Nile, Cleopatra. For old time's sake."

He said nothing, but his eyes showed his appreciation.

"What you have to understand is that they're both gone, in a sense. You'll never be with Cleo again. I look like her now. I resemble her inside, too, like an adult resembles the child. I have a tremendous amount in common with what she was. But I'm not her."

He nodded. She sat beside him and took his hand.

"Jules, this isn't going to be easy. There are things I want to do, people I want to meet. We're not going to be able to share the same friends. We could drift apart because of it. I'm going to have to fight resentment because you'll be holding me back. You won't let me explore your female side like I want to. You're going to resent me because I'll be trying to force you into something you think is wrong for you. But I want to try and make it work."

He let out his breath. "God, Cl . . . Nile. I've never been so scared in my life. I thought you were leading up to leaving me."

She squeezed his hand. "Not if I can help it. I want each of us to try and accept the other as they are. For me, that includes being male whenever I feel like it. It's all the same to me, but I know it's going to be hard for *you*."

They embraced, and Jules wiped his tears on her shoulder, then faced her again.

"I'll do anything and everything in my power, up to—"

She put her finger to her lips. "I know. I accept you that way. But I'll keep trying to convince you."

UNACCOMPANIED SONATA

by Orson Scott Card

There are utopias of hope and utopias of technology, utopias of reason and utopias of organization, but here's a future for humanity which creates a contented and perfectly functioning world by means which are not only unprecedented but positively frightening. The gooseflesh thing about this new political concept is that it might work.

Tuning Up

When Christian Haroldsen was six months old, preliminary tests showed a predisposition toward rhythm and a keen awareness of pitch. There were other tests, of course, and many possible routes still open to him. But rhythm and pitch were the governing signs of his own private zodiac, and already the reinforcement began. Mr. and Mrs. Haroldsen were provided with tapes of many kinds of sound, and instructed to play them constantly, waking or sleeping.

When Christian Haroldsen was two years old, his seventh battery of tests pinpointed the future he would inevitably follow. His creativity was exceptional, his curiosity insatiable, his understanding of music so intense that the top of all the tests said, "Prodigy."

Prodigy was the word that took him from his parents' home to

a house in a deep deciduous forest where winter was savage and violent and summer a brief desperate eruption of green. He grew up cared for by unsinging servants, and the only music he was allowed to hear was birdsong, and windsong, and the cracking of winter wood; thunder, and the faint cry of golden leaves as they broke free and tumbled to the earth; rain on the roof and the drip of water from icicles; the chatter of squirrels and the deep silence of snow falling on a moonless night.

These sounds were Christian's only conscious music; he grew up with the symphonies of his early years only a distant and impossible-to-retrieve memory. And so he learned to hear music in unmusical things—for he had to find music, even when there was none to find.

He found that colors made sounds in his mind: sunlight in summer a blaring chord; moonlight in winter a thin mournful wail; new green in spring a low murmur in almost (but not quite) random rhythms; the flash of a red fox in the leaves a gasp of startlement.

And he learned to play all those sounds on his Instrument.

In the world were violins, trumpets, clarinets and crumhorns, as there had been for centuries. Christian knew nothing of that. Only his Instrument was available. It was enough.

One room in Christian's house, which he had alone most of the time, he lived in: a bed (not too soft), a chair and table, a silent machine that cleaned him and his clothing, and an electric light.

The other room contained only his Instrument. It was a console with many keys and strips and levers and bars, and when he touched any part of it, a sound came out. Every key made a different sound; every point on the strips made a different pitch; every lever modified the tone; every bar altered the structure of the sound.

When he first came to the house, Christian played (as children will) with the Instrument, making strange and funny noises. It was his only playmate; he learned it well, could produce any sound he wanted to. At first he delighted in loud, blaring tones. Later he began to learn the pleasure of silences and rhythms. Later he began to play with soft and loud, and to play two sounds at once, and to change those two sounds together to make a new sound, and to play again a sequence of sounds he had played before.

Gradually, the sounds of the forest outside his house found their way into the music he played. He learned to make winds sing through his Instrument; he learned to make summer one of the songs he could play at will; green with its infinite variations was his most subtle harmony; the birds cried out from his Instrument with all the passion of Christian's loneliness.

And the word spread to the licensed Listeners:

"There's a new sound north of here, east of here; Christian Haroldsen, and he'll tear out your heart with his songs."

The Listeners came, a few to whom variety was everything first, then those to whom novelty and vogue mattered most, and at last those who valued beauty and passion above everything else. They came, and stayed out in Christian's woods, and listened as his music was played through perfect speakers on the roof of his house. When the music stopped, and Christian came out of his house, he could see the Listeners moving away; he asked, and was told why they came; he marveled that the things he did for love on his Instrument could be of interest to other people.

He felt, strangely, even more lonely to know that he could sing to the Listeners and yet would never be able to hear their songs.

"But they have no songs," said the woman who came to bring him food every day. "They are Listeners. You are a Maker. You have songs, and they listen."

"Why?" asked Christian, innocently.

The woman looked puzzled. "Because that's what they want most to do. They've been tested, and they are happiest as Listeners. You are happiest as a Maker. Aren't you happy?"

"Yes," Christian answered, and he was telling the truth. His life was perfect, and he wouldn't change anything, not even the sweet sadness of the backs of the Listeners as they walked away at the end of his songs.

Christian was seven years old.

First Movement

For the third time the short man with glasses and a strangely inappropriate mustache dared to wait in the underbrush for Christian to come out. For the third time he was overcome by the beauty of the song that had just ended, a mournful symphony that made the short man with glasses feel the pressure of the leaves

above him even though it was summer and they had months left before they would fall. The fall was still inevitable, said Christian's song, through all their life the leaves hold within them the power to die, and that must color their life. The short man with glasses wept—but when the song ended and the other Listeners moved away, he hid in the brush and waited.

This time his wait was rewarded. Christian came out of his house, and walked among the trees, and came toward where the short man with glasses waited. The short man admired the easy, unpostured way that Christian walked. The composer looked to be about thirty, yet there was something childish in the way he looked around him, the way his walk was aimless and prone to stop just so he could touch (not break) a fallen twig with his bare toes.

"Christian," said the short man with glasses.

Christian turned, startled. In all these years, no Listener had ever spoken to him. It was forbidden. Christian knew the law.

"It's forbidden," Christian said.

"Here," the short man with glasses said, holding out a small black object.

"What is it?"

The short man grimaced. "Just take it. Push the button and it plays."

"Plays?"

"Music."

Christian's eyes went wide. "But that's forbidden. I can't have my creativity polluted by hearing other musicians' work. That would make me imitative and derivative instead of original."

"Reciting," the man said. "You're just reciting that. This is Bach's music." There was reverence in his voice.

"I can't," Christian said.

And then the short man shook his head. "You don't know. You don't know what you're missing. But I heard it in your song when I came here years ago, Christian. You want this."

"It's forbidden," Christian answered, for to him the very fact that a man who knew an act was forbidden still wanted to perform it was astounding, and he couldn't get past the novelty of it to realize that some action was expected of him.

There were footsteps and words being spoken in the distance, and the short man's face became frightened. He ran at Christian,

forced the recorder into his hands, then took off toward the gate of the preserve.

Christian took the recorder and held it in a spot of sunlight coming through the leaves. It gleamed dully. "Bach," Christian said. Then, "Who the hell is Bach?"

But he didn't throw the recorder down. Nor did he give the recorder to the woman who came to ask him what the short man with glasses had stayed for. "He stayed for at least ten minutes."

"I only saw him for thirty seconds," Christian answered.

"And?"

"He wanted me to hear some other music. He had a recorder."

"Did he give it to you?"

"No," Christian said. "Doesn't he still have it?"

"He must have dropped it in the woods."

"He said it was Bach."

"It's forbidden. That's all you need to know. If you should find the recorder, Christian, you know the law."

"I'll give it to you."

She looked at him carefully. "You know what would happen if you listened to such a thing."

Christian nodded.

"Very well. We'll be looking for it, too. I'll see you tomorrow, Christian. And next time somebody stays after, don't talk to him. Just come back in the house and lock the doors."

"I'll do that," Christian said.

When she left, he played his Instrument for hours. More Listeners came, and those who had heard Christian before were surprised at the confusion in his song.

There was a summer rainstorm that night, wind and rain and thunder, and Christian found that he could not sleep. Not from the music of the weather—he'd slept through a thousand such storms. It was the recorder that lay behind the Instrument against the wall. Christian had lived for nearly thirty years surrounded only by this wild, beautiful place and the music he himself made. But now.

Now he could not stop wondering. Who was Bach? Who *is* Bach? What is his music? How is it different from mine? Has he discovered things that I don't know?

What is his music?

What is his music?

What is his music?

Until at dawn, when the storm was abating and the wind had died, Christian got out of his bed, where he had not slept but only tossed back and forth all night, and took the recorder from its hiding place and played it.

At first it sounded strange, like noise, odd sounds that had nothing to do with the sounds of Christian's life. But the patterns were clear, and by the end of the recording, which was not even a half-hour long, Christian had mastered the idea of fugue and the sound of the harpsichord preyed on his mind.

Yet he knew that if he let these things show up in his music, he would be discovered. So he did not try a fugue. He did not attempt to imitate the harpsichord's sound.

And every night he listened to the recording, for many nights, learning more and more until finally the Watcher came.

The Watcher was blind, and a dog led him. He came to the door and because he was a Watcher the door opened for him without his even knocking.

"Christian Haroldsen, where is the recorder?" the Watcher asked.

"Recorder?" Christian asked, then knew it was hopeless, and took the machine and gave it to the Watcher.

"Oh, Christian," said the Watcher, and his voice was mild and sorrowful. "Why didn't you turn it in without listening to it?"

"I meant to," Christian said. "But how did you know?"

"Because suddenly there are no fugues in your work. Suddenly your songs have lost the only Bachlike thing about them. And you've stopped experimenting with new sounds. What were you trying to avoid?"

"This," Christian said, and he sat down and on his first try duplicated the sound of the harpsichord.

"Yet you've never tried to do that until now, have you?"

"I thought you'd notice."

"Fugues and harpsichord, the two things you noticed first—and the only things you didn't absorb into your music. All your other songs for these last weeks have been tinted and colored and influenced by Bach. Except that there was no fugue, and there was no harpsichord. You have broken the law. You were put here because you were a genius, creating new things with only nature for your inspiration. Now, of course, you're derivative, and truly new creation is impossible for you. You'll have to leave."

"I know," Christian said, afraid yet not really understanding what life outside his house would be like.

"We'll train you for the kinds of jobs you can pursue now. You won't starve. You won't die of boredom. But because you broke the law, one thing is forbidden to you now."

"Music."

"Not all music. There is music of a sort, Christian, that the common people, the ones who aren't Listeners, can have. Radio and television and record music. But live music and new music—those are forbidden to you. You may not sing. You may not play an instrument. You may not tap out a rhythm."

"Why not?"

The Watcher shook his head. "The world is too perfect, too at peace, too happy for us to permit a misfit who broke the law to go about spreading discontent. The common people make casual music of a sort, knowing nothing better because they haven't the aptitude to learn it. But if you—never mind. It's the law. And if you make more music, Christian, you will be punished drastically. Drastically."

Christian nodded, and when the Watcher told him to come, he came, leaving behind the house and the woods and his Instrument. At first he took it calmly, as the inevitable punishment for his infraction; but he had little concept of punishment, or of what exile from his Instrument would mean.

Within five hours he was shouting and striking out at anyone who came near him, because his fingers craved the touch of the Instrument's keys and levers and strips and bars, and he could not have them, and now he knew that he had never been lonely before.

It took six months before he was ready for normal life. And when he left the Retraining Center (a small building, because it was so rarely used), he looked tired, and years older, and he didn't smile at anyone. He became a delivery truck driver, because the tests said that this was a job that would least grieve him, and least remind him of his loss, and most engage his few remaining aptitudes and interests.

He delivered donuts to grocery stores.

And at night he discovered the mysteries of alcohol, and the alcohol and the donuts and the truck and his dreams were enough that he was, in his way, content. He had no anger in him. He could live the rest of his life this way, without bitterness.

He delivered fresh donuts and took the stale ones away with him.

Second Movement

"With a name like Joe," Joe always said, "I had to open a bar and grill, just so I could put up a sign saying Joe's Bar and Grill." And he laughed and laughed, because after all Joe's Bar and Grill was a funny name these days.

But Joe was a good bartender, and the Watchers had put him in the right kind of place. Not in a big city, but in a smaller town; a town just off the freeway, where truck drivers often came; a town not far from a large city, so that interesting things were nearby to be talked about and worried about and bitched about and loved.

Joe's Bar and Grill was, therefore, a nice place to come, and many people came there. Not fashionable people, and not drunks, but lonely people and friendly people in just the right mixture. "My clients are like a good drink, just enough of this and that to make a new flavor that tastes better than any of the ingredients." Oh, Joe was a poet, he was a poet of alcohol and like many another person these days, he often said, "My father was a lawyer, and in the old days I would have probably ended up a lawyer, too, and I never would have known what I was missing."

Joe was right. And he was a damn good bartender, and he didn't wish he were anything else, and so he was happy.

One night, however, a new man came in, a man with a donut delivery truck and a donut brand name on his uniform. Joe noticed him because silence clung to the man like a smell—wherever he walked, people sensed it, and though they scarcely looked at him, they lowered their voices, or stopped talking at all, and they got reflective and looked at the walls and the mirror behind the bar. The donut delivery man sat in a corner and had a watered-down drink that meant he intended to stay a long time and didn't want his alcohol intake to be so rapid that he was forced to leave early.

Joe noticed things about people, and he noticed that this man kept looking off in the dark corner where the piano stood. It was an old, out-of-tune monstrosity from the old days (for this had been a bar for a long time) and Joe wondered why the man was fascinated by it. True, a lot of Joe's customers had been inter-

ested, but they had always walked over and plunked on the keys, trying to find a melody, failing with the out-of-tune keys, and finally giving up. This man, however, seemed almost afraid of the piano, and didn't go near it.

At closing time, the man was still there, and then, on a whim, instead of making the man leave, Joe turned off the piped-in music and turned off most of the lights, and then went over and lifted the lid and exposed the grey keys.

The donut delivery man came over to the piano. *Chris,* his nametag said. He sat and touched a single key. The sound was not pretty. But the man touched all the keys one by one, and then touched them in different orders, and all the time Joe watched, wondering why the man was so intense about it.

"Chris," Joe said.

Chris looked up at him.

"Do you know any songs?"

Chris's face went funny.

"I mean, some of those old-time songs, not those fancy ass-twitchers on the radio, but *songs*. 'In a Little Spanish Town.' My Mother sang that one to me." And Joe began to sing, "In a little Spanish town, 'twas on a night like this. Stars were peek-a-booing down, 'twas on a night like this."

Chris began to play as Joe's weak and toneless baritone went on with the song. But it wasn't an accompaniment, not anything Joe could call an accompaniment. It was instead an opponent to his melody, an enemy to it, and the sounds coming out of the piano were strange and unharmonious and by God beautiful. Joe stopped singing and listened. For two hours he listened, and when it was over he soberly poured the man a drink, and poured one for himself, and clinked glasses with Chris the donut delivery man who could take that rotten old piano and make the damn thing sing.

Three nights later Chris came back, looking harried and afraid. But this time Joe knew what would happen (had to happen) and instead of waiting until closing time, Joe turned off the piped-in music ten minutes early. Chris looked up at him pleadingly. Joe misunderstood—he went over and lifted the lid to the keyboard and smiled. Chris walked stiffly, perhaps reluctantly, to the stool and sat.

"Hey, Joe," one of the last five customers shouted, "closing early?"

Joe didn't answer. Just watched as Chris began to play. No preliminaries this time; no scales and wanderings over the keys. Just power, and the piano was played as pianos aren't meant to be played; the bad notes, the out-of-tune notes were fit into the music so that they sounded right, and Chris's fingers, ignoring the strictures of the twelve-tone scale, played, it seemed to Joe, in the cracks.

None of the customers left until Chris finished an hour and a half later. They all shared that final drink, and went home shaken by the experience.

The next night Chris came again, and the next, and the next. Whatever private battle had kept him away for the first few days after his first night of playing, he had apparently won it or lost it. None of Joe's business. What Joe cared about was the fact that when Chris played the piano, it did things to him that music had never done, and he wanted it.

The customers apparently wanted it, too. Near closing time people began showing up, apparently just to hear Chris play. Joe began starting the piano music earlier and earlier, and he had to discontinue the free drinks after the playing because there were so many people it would have put him out of business.

It went on for two long, strange months. The delivery van pulled up outside, and people stood aside for Chris to enter. No one said anything to him; no one said anything at all, but everyone waited until he began to play the piano. He drank nothing at all. Just played. And between songs the hundreds of people in Joe's Bar and Grill ate and drank.

But the merriment was gone. The laughter and the chatter and the camaraderie were missing, and after a while Joe grew tired of the music and wanted to have his bar back the way it was. He toyed with the idea of getting rid of the piano, but the customers would have been angry at him. He thought of asking Chris not to come anymore, but he could not bring himself to speak to the strange silent man.

And so finally he did what he knew he should have done in the first place. He called the Watchers.

They came in the middle of a performance, a blind Watcher with a dog on a leash, and a Watcher with no ears who walked unsteadily, holding to things for balance. They came in the middle of a song, and did not wait for it to end. They walked to the

piano and closed the lid gently, and Chris withdrew his fingers and looked at the closed lid.

"Oh, Christian," said the man with the seeing-eye dog.

"I'm sorry," Christian answered. "I tried not to."

"Oh, Christian, how can I bear doing to you what must be done?"

"Do it," Christian said.

And so the man with no ears took a laser knife from his coat pocket and cut off Christian's fingers and thumbs, right where they rooted into his hands. The laser cauterized and sterilized the wound even as it cut, but still some blood spattered on Christian's uniform. And, his hands now meaningless palms and useless knuckles, Christian stood and walked out of Joe's Bar and Grill. The people made way for him again, and they listened intently as the blind Watcher said, "That was a man who broke the law and was forbidden to be a Maker. He broke the law a second time, and the law insists that he be stopped from breaking down the system that makes all of you so happy."

The people understood. It grieved them, it made them uncomfortable for a few hours, but once they had returned home to their exactly-right homes and got back to their exactly-right jobs, the sheer contentment of their lives overwhelmed their momentary sorrow for Chris. After all, Chris had broken the law. And it was the law that kept them all safe and happy.

Even Joe. Even Joe soon forgot Chris and his music. He knew he had done the right thing. He couldn't figure out, though, why a man like Chris would have broken the law in the first place, or what law he would have broken. There wasn't a law in the world that wasn't designed to make people happy—and there wasn't a law Joe could think of that he was even mildly interested in breaking.

Yet. Once Joe went to the piano and lifted the lid and played every key on the piano. And when he had done that he put his head down on the piano and cried, because he knew that when Chris lost that piano, lost even his fingers so he could never play again—it was like Joe losing his bar. And if Joe ever lost his bar, his life wouldn't be worth living.

As for Chris, someone else began coming to the bar driving the same donut delivery van, and no one ever saw Chris again in that part of the world.

Third Movement

"Oh what a beautiful mornin'!" sang the road crew man who had seen *Oklahoma!* four times in his home town.

"Rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham!" sang the road crew man who had learned to sing when his family got together with guitars.

"Lead, kindly light, amid the encircling gloom!" sang the road crew man who believed.

But the road crew man without hands, who held the signs telling the traffic to Stop or go Slow, listened but never sang.

"Whyn't you never sing?" asked the road crew man who liked Rodgers and Hammerstein; asked all of them, at one time or another.

And the man they called Sugar just shrugged. "Don't feel like singin'," he'd say, when he said anything at all.

"Why they call him Sugar?" a new guy once asked. "He don't look sweet to me."

And the man who believed said, "His initals are C.H. Like the sugar. C&H, you know." And the new guy laughed. A stupid joke, but the kind of gag that makes life easier on the road building crew.

Not that life was that hard. For these men, too, had been tested, and they were in the job that made them happiest. They took pride in the pain of sunburn and pulled muscles, and the road growing long and thin behind them was the most beautiful thing in the world. And so they sang all day at their work, knowing that they could not possibly be happier than they were this day.

Except Sugar.

Then Guillermo came. A short Mexican who spoke with an accent, Guillermo told everyone who asked, "I may come from Sonora, but my heart belongs in Milano!" And when anyone asked why (and often when no one asked anything) he'd explain. "I'm an Italian tenor in a Mexican body," and he proved it by singing every note that Puccini and Verdi ever wrote. "Caruso was nothing," Guillermo boasted. "Listen to this!"

Guillermo had records, and sang along with them, and at work on the road crew he'd join in with any man's song and harmonize with it, or sing an obligatto high above the melody, a soaring

tenor that took the roof off his head and filled the clouds. "I can sing," Guillermo would say, and soon the other road crew men answered, "Damn right, Guillermo! Sing it again!"

But one night Guillermo was honest, and told the truth. "Ah, my friends, I'm no singer."

"What do you mean? Of course you are!" came the unanimous answer.

"Nonsense!" Guillermo cried, his voice theatrical. "If I am this great singer, why do you never see me going off to record songs? Hey? This is a great singer? Nonsense! Great singers they raise to be great singers. I'm just a man who loves to sing, but has no talent! I'm a man who loves to work on the road crew with men like you, and sing his guts out, but in the opera I could never be! Never!"

He did not say it sadly. He said it fervently, confidently. "Here is where I belong! I can sing to you who like to hear me sing! I can harmonize with you when I feel a harmony in my heart. But don't be thinking that Guillermo is a great singer, because he's not!"

It was an evening of honesty, and every man there explained why it was he was happy on the road crew, and didn't wish to be anywhere else. Everyone, that is, except Sugar.

"Come on, Sugar. Aren't you happy here?"

Sugar smiled. "I'm happy. I like it here. This is good work for me. And I love to hear you sing."

"Then why don't you sing with us?"

Sugar shook his head. "I'm not a singer."

But Guillermo looked at him knowingly. "Not a singer, ha! Not a singer. A man without hands who refuses to sing is not a man who is not a singer. Hey?"

"What the hell did that mean?" asked the man who sang folksongs.

"It means that this man you call Sugar, he's a fraud. Not a singer! Look at his hands. All his fingers gone! Who is it who cuts off men's fingers?"

The road crew didn't try to guess. There were many ways a man could lose fingers, and none of them were anyone's business.

"He loses his fingers because he breaks the law and the Watchers cut them off! That's how a man loses fingers. What was he doing with his fingers that the Watchers wanted him to stop? He was breaking the law, wasn't he?"

"Stop," Sugar said.

"If you want," Guillermo said, but for once the others would not respect Sugar's privacy.

"Tell us," they said.

Sugar left the room.

"Tell us," and Guillermo told them. That Sugar must have been a Maker who broke the law and was forbidden to make music anymore. The very thought that a Maker was working on the road crew with them—even a lawbreaker—filled the men with awe. Makers were rare, and they were the most esteemed of men and women.

"But why his fingers?"

"Because," Guillermo said, "he must have tried to make music again afterward. And when you break the law a second time, the power to break it a third time is taken away from you." Guillermo spoke seriously, and so to the road crew men Sugar's story sounded as majestic and terrible as an opera. They crowded into Sugar's room, and found the man staring at the wall.

"Sugar, is it true?" asked the man who loved Rodgers and Hammerstein.

"Were you a Maker?" asked the man who believed.

"Yes," Sugar said.

"But Sugar," the man who believed said, "God can't mean for a man to stop making music, even if he broke the law."

Sugar smiled. "No one asked God."

"Sugar," Guillermo finally said, "there are nine of us on the crew, nine of us, and we're miles from any human beings. You know us, Sugar. We swear on our mother's graves, every one of us, that we'll never tell a soul. Why should we? You're one of us. But sing, dammit man, sing!"

"I can't," Sugar said. "You don't understand."

"It isn't what God intended," said the man who believed. "We're all doing what we love best, and here you are, loving music and not able to sing a note. Sing for us! Sing with us! And only you and us and God will know!"

They all promised. They all pled.

And the next day as the man who loved Rodgers and Hammerstein sang "Love, Look Away," Sugar began to hum. As the man who believed sang "God of our Fathers," Sugar sang softly along. And as the man who loved folksongs sang "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," Sugar joined in with a strange, piping voice and all the

men laughed and cheered and welcomed Sugar's voice to the songs.

Inevitably Sugar began inventing. First harmonies, of course, strange harmonies that made Guillermo frown and then, after a while, grin as he joined in, sensing as best he could what Sugar was doing to the music.

And after harmonies, Sugar began singing his own melodies, with his own words. He made them repetitive, the words simple and the melodies simpler still. And yet he shaped them into odd shapes, and built them into songs that had never been heard of before, that sounded wrong and yet were absolutely right. It was not long before the man who loved Rodgers and Hammerstein and the man who sang folksongs and the man who believed were learning Sugar's songs and singing them joyously or mournfully or angrily or gaily as they worked along the road.

Even Guillermo learned the songs, and his strong tenor was changed by them until his voice, which had, after all, been ordinary, became something unusual and fine. Guillermo finally said to Sugar one day, "Hey, Sugar, your music is all wrong, man. But I like the way it feels in my nose! Hey, you know? I like the way it feels in my mouth!"

Some of the songs were hymns: "Keep me hungry, Lord," Sugar sang, and the road crew sang it too.

Some of the songs were love songs: "Put your hands in someone else's pockets," Sugar sang angrily; "I hear your voice in the morning," Sugar sang tenderly; "Is it summer yet?" Sugar sang sadly; and the road crew sang it, too.

Over the months the road crew changed, one man leaving on Wednesday and a new man taking his place on Thursday, as different skills were needed in different places. Sugar was silent when each newcomer came, until the man had given his word and the secret was sure to be kept.

What finally destroyed Sugar was the fact that his songs were so unforgettable. The men who left would sing the songs with their new crews, and those crews would learn them, and teach them to others. Crewmen taught the songs in bars and on the road; people learned them quickly, and loved them; and one day a blind Watcher heard the songs and knew, instantly, who had first sung them. They were Christian Haroldsen's music, because in those melodies, simple as they were, the wind of the north woods still whistled and the fall of leaves still hung oppressively

over every note and—and the Watcher sighed. He took a specialized tool from his file of tools and boarded an airplane and flew to the city closest to where a certain road crew worked. And the blind Watcher took a company car with a company driver up the road and at the end of it, where the road was just beginning to swallow a strip of wilderness, the blind Watcher got out of the car and heard singing. Heard a piping voice singing a song that made even an eyeless man weep.

"Christian," the Watcher said, and the song stopped.

"You," said Christian.

"Christian, even after you lost your fingers?"

The other men didn't understand—all the other men, that is, except Guillermo.

"Watcher," said Guillermo. "Watcher, he done no harm."

The Watcher smiled wryly. "No one said he did. But he broke the law. You, Guillermo, how would you like to work as a servant in a rich man's house? How would you like to be a bank teller?"

"Don't take me from the road crew, man," Guillermo said.

"It's the law that finds where people will be happy. But Christian Haroldsen broke the law. And he's gone around ever since making people hear music they were never meant to hear."

Guillermo knew he had lost the battle before it began, but he couldn't stop himself. "Don't hurt him, man. I was meant to hear his music. Swear to God, it's made me happier."

The Watcher shook his head sadly. "Be honest, Guillermo. You're an honest man. His music's made you miserable, hasn't it? You've got everything you could want in life, and yet his music makes you sad. All the time, sad."

Guillermo tried to argue, but he was honest, and he looked into his own heart, and he knew that the music was full of grief. Even the happy songs mourned for something; even the angry songs wept; even the love songs seemed to say that everything dies and contentment is the most fleeting thing. Guillermo looked in his own heart and all Sugar's music stared back up at him and Guillermo wept.

"Just don't hurt him, please," Guillermo murmured as he cried.

"I won't," the blind Watcher said. Then he walked to Christian, who stood passively waiting, and he held the special tool up to Christian's throat. Christian gasped.

"No," Christian said, but the word only formed with his lips and tongue. No sound came out. Just a hiss of air. "No."

"Yes," the Watcher said.

The road crew watched silently as the Watcher led Christian away. They did not sing for days. But then Guillermo forgot his grief one day and sang an aria from *La Bohème,* and the songs went on from there. Now and then they sang one of Sugar's songs, because the songs could not be forgotten.

In the city, the blind Watcher furnished Christian with a pad of paper and a pen. Christian immediately gripped the pencil in the crease of his palm and wrote: "What do I do now?"

The blind Watcher laughed. "Have we got a job for you! Oh, Christian, have we got a job for you!" The dog barked loudly, to hear his master laugh.

Applause

In all the world there were only two dozen Watchers. They were secretive men, who supervised a system that needed little supervision because it actually made nearly everybody happy. It was a good system, but like even the most perfect of machines, here and there it broke down. Here and there someone acted madly, and damaged himself, and to protect everyone and the person himself, a Watcher had to notice the madness and go to fix it.

For many years the best of the Watchers was a man with no fingers, a man with no voice. He would come silently, wearing the uniform that named him with the only name he needed—Authority. And he would find the kindest, easiest, yet most thorough way of solving the problem and curing the madness and preserving the system that made the world, for the first time in history, a very good place to live. For pratically everyone.

For there were still a few people—one or two each year—who were caught in a circle of their own devising, who could neither adjust to the system nor bear to harm it, people who kept breaking the law despite their knowledge that it would destroy them.

Eventually, when the gentle maimings and deprivations did not cure their madness and set them back into the system, they were given uniforms and they, too, went out. Watching.

The keys of power were placed in the hands of those who had most cause to hate the system they had to preserve. Were they sorrowful?

"I am," Christian answered in the moments when he dared to ask himself that question.

In sorrow he did his duty. In sorrow he grew old. And finally the other Watchers, who reverenced the silent man (for they knew he had once sung magnificent songs), told him he was free. "You've served your time," said the Watcher with no legs, and he smiled.

Christian raised an eyebrow, as if to say, "And?"

"So wander."

Christian wandered. He took off his uniform, but lacking neither money nor time he found few doors closed to him. He wandered where in his former lives he had once lived. A road in the mountains. A city where he had once known the loading entrance of every restaurant and coffee shop and grocery store. And at last to a place in the woods where a house was falling apart in the weather because it had not been used in forty years.

Christian was old. The thunder roared and it only made him realize that it was about to rain. All the old songs. All the old songs, he mourned inside himself, more because he couldn't remember them than because he thought his life had been particularly sad.

As he sat in a coffee shop in a nearby town to stay out of the rain, he heard four teenagers who played the guitar very badly singing a song that he knew. It was a song he had invented while the asphalt poured on a hot summer day. The teenagers were not musicians and certainly not Makers. But they sang the song from their hearts, and even though the words were happy, the song made everyone who heard it cry.

Christian wrote on the pad he always carried, and showed his question to the boys. "Where did that song come from?"

"It's a Sugar song," the leader of the group answered. "It's a song by Sugar."

Christian raised an eyebrow, making a shrugging motion.

"Sugar was a guy who worked on a road crew and made up songs. He's dead now, though," the boy answered.

"Best damn songs in the world," another boy said, and they all nodded.

Christian smiled. Then he wrote (and the boys waited impa-

tiently for this speechless old man to go away): "Aren't you happy? Why sing sad songs?"

The boys were at a loss for an answer. The leader spoke up, though, and said, "Sure I'm happy. I've got a good job, a girl I like, and man, I couldn't ask for more. I got my guitar. I got my songs. And my friends."

And another boy said, "These songs aren't sad, mister. Sure, they make people cry, but they aren't sad."

"Yeah," said another. "It's just that they were written by a man who knows."

Christian scribbled on his paper. "Knows what?"

"He just knows. Just knows, that's all. Knows it all."

And then the teenagers turned back to their clumsy guitars and their young, untrained voices, and Christian walked to the door to leave because the rain had stopped and because he knew when to leave the stage. He turned and bowed just a little toward the singers. They didn't notice him, but their voices were all the applause he needed. He left the ovation and went outside where the leaves were just turning color and would soon, with a slight inaudible sound, break free and fall to the earth.

For a moment he thought he heard himself singing. But it was just the last of the wind, coasting madly through the wires over the street. It was a frenzied song, and Christian thought he had recognized his voice.

THE STORY WRITER

by Richard Wilson

The moving hand writes and having writ moves on . . . and if you use an eraser or hire a good rewrite man what the moving hand wrote can be rewrit or even unwrit. This is contrary to Omar Khayyam, perhaps, but may not be contrary to the way things are if we are to believe the suspicions of physicists that nothing in the universe is either fixed or absolute. Dick Wilson, one of the original Futurians—a fabled club of science fiction fans whose relation to modern fandom is rather like that of Caesar's Rome to Waldheim's U.N.—having observed professionally the way things are reported shows what a story writer can achieve if he has the right backers.

A man at a flea market sat at a typewriter reading. His table was the barest of all. On it were a ream of paper, a pencil and a sign: "This Typewriter for Hire. A Story Written about You: $1 a Page." The typewriter was an old Remington office model on a stand next to the table.

Other tables were crowded with curios, knickknacks, carnival and depression glass, insulators, china, woodenware, campaign buttons, barbed wire and other collectibles and bygones. Few dealers brought valuable antiques to an outdoor flea market; there was always the threat of pilferage or breakage or rain.

The story writer was a man of 55 with a tidy mustache. He was William Wylie Ross, one of the last of the old-time pulp writers.

He was smoking a pipe and reading a book of short stories by Slawomir Mrozek called *The Elephant.*

A boy of 10, who had stood watching Ross, went up to him and said: "Dzién dobry."

"I beg your pardon?" Ross said.

"I said good morning in Polish. You are reading a book by a Pole and I am of Polish descent. I thought you might be too."

"No. I read Mrozek only in translation. Good morning. What is your name?"

"Nazywam sie Henry. Jak sie pan nazywa? I said in Polish: 'My name is Henry. What is your name?' My father, who was born in Poland, says it is good to preserve the traditions. I am bilingual."

"Your father is wise," Ross said. "My name—Nazywam sie Ross. Did I say it right?"

"Very well. Is Ross your first or your last name?"

Ross gave the boy a card. It said: *William Wylie Ross, freelance writer; short paragraphs at the going rate, full-fledged autobiographies by arrangement.*

The boy read the card. "It says nothing of a story about me."

"That could be a biography; they run 300 pages up. In your case maybe 20 pages, depending on how intensely you've lived. A shorter work, as the sign says, is a dollar a page. Would you like one?"

"Can you write a ghost story?" Henry asked.

"Would you like a sample? No charge."

"Yes, please."

Ross put down his book and rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter. He wrote. "Henry sat alone in his room. He was the last person on Earth. There was a knock at the door."

He took the sheet out and gave it to Henry. "That's the world's shortest ghost story."

"It doesn't have a title. And it doesn't say who wrote it."

"A critic, are you?" Ross put it back in the machine. He typed WORLD'S SHORTEST GHOST STORY and, below that, by *W. W. Ross.* He said to the boy: "I don't use my full name on such a short piece. Besides, it's not original except for the name of the protagonist."

"What's a protagonist?"

"You are. The main character. The boy in the room. The one who knocked at the door may be the antagonist."

"Oh. Can you write a true story about me?"

"I can."

Henry took a dollar from his pocket and put it on the table. Ross wrote a story about a ghost writer and a boy named Henry who asked him to write a ghost story. He worked quickly on the story, which was similar to what you have just read, except that he left out the Polish because he couldn't spell it. Double-spaced, it ran to two pages plus a paragraph on the third.

Henry looked embarrassed. "I have only a dollar."

Ross handed him the pages. "No extra charge. It's really a collaboration."

A man had come to watch. He said to Ross: "I am Henry's father."

"How do you do."

"I am well, thank you. I am glad Henry spent his dollar here instead of in a foolish way. You read Mrozek. Do you admire Polish writers? Korzeniowski? Later he called himself Conrad."

"I admire good writers whatever their nationality. I admire Conrad."

"Dziekuje bardzo. Thank you very much. And thank you for what you have written for Henry, moj syn. My son. I think he could be a writer one day. Dowidzenia. Good-by."

"Dowidzenia," Ross said. "Dziekuje bardzo, Henry."

Several tables away a young dealer had set up at the back of his camper. His sign read *Mad Wayne Anthony, Stony Point, N.Y.*, ANTIQUES 1870 UP. Ross supposed it meant some of his wares qualified as antiques by being at least a hundred years old and that Wayne had combined an allusion to their price; his least expensive was marked $18.70. There was a small hand-lettered card on his table which said *We haggle.*

Wayne Anthony had old 78-rpm records. He played one now and again on a Victrola. He had a ritual of wiping it with a treated cloth, holding it by its edges as he settled it over the spindle, winding the machine and carefully placing the needle. The music, not amplified except by the big old horn, was clear but unobtrusive. Ross could ignore it if he chose or he could give it his attention and savor the old melodies. At the moment, Wayne, who explained to his fellow dealers that the records were not for sale and that he was planning to go to Heuvelton where there was a barn full of real oldies, was playing *It's Like Old Times.*

Ross saw his next customer. Sometimes he could tell who it would be. She was a plump young woman who had stood within earshot until Henry and his father left. She walked sideways to Ross's table as if she were going somewhere else. Ross became engrossed in relighting his pipe until the girl was at his elbow. He picked up his book, said casually "Hello, young lady," found his place and pretended to read.

The girl said: "Excuse me. Could you write a story about me?"

He exhaled smoke and put the book down. "If I knew something about you I could try."

"There's not much to tell."

"There might be. Let's start with names. Mine's Ross. What's yours?"

"It's funny you should ask that because I've changed it."

"*Did* you? That's a beginning. Tell me about it."

Ross and the girl talked. People who had watched while he wrote Henry's story went away. She talked more freely. She said things to him, a stranger, that it was possible she'd never told another.

"Yes," he said. "I can write your story. If you don't care for it you needn't pay. But you haven't told me your name or why you changed it."

"My name is Mabel." She talked some more.

Ross wrote this story:

Once a young woman named Mabel who thought she was plain changed her name to May-Belle because she wanted something about her to be beautiful. She was not really plain. She had good features and a ripe, honest figure. But she was afraid her boy friend found her unattractive. She thought he preferred Jane, who painted her face and had a fashion-model figure. The boy, Ralph, went off to war and came back blind.

Jane went to see him once, out of duty, at his parents' house. She never went again.

May-Belle invited Ralph to a picnic and they had a fine day. After that they were together often. Inevitably they talked about Jane. Ralph said: "You know, I used to like Jane but I don't any more."

"I can't understand why," May-Belle said. "She's prettier than ever."

"Is she?" Ralph asked. "It must be skin-deep pretty because I can't see it. I can see you, though, and I see you beautiful,

Mabel." The blind boy called her by her old name and she liked it.

Ralph learned Braille and got a job at a radio station and after a while he was a popular disk jockey. And when he and the girl of his choice went to the town clerk to get a marriage license she spelled her name Mabel because he liked it that way.

A simple story for a simple girl? No, a straightforward story for a straightforward girl. Ross had felt good writing it and she'd been pleased with her dollar's worth.

Ross didn't wish the boy blindness, except to Jane's skin-deep beauty. He wished heartily for the happiness of May-Belle, by any name. He had an idea her last name would be Ralph's.

William Wylie Ross had not been as prolific as Max Brand or Lester Dent but he had done well enough in the pulp magazines after a stint in reporting. He had come to the pulp field later than the veterans but had earned his two or three cents a word when that was good money. He used a distinctive three-name byline as many had before him—Carroll John Daly, William MacLeod Raine, Joel Tinsley Rogers, Edgar Rice Burroughs.

After the paperbacks killed the pulps he wrote for them and later for television. He adapted one of his western tales as a pilot for a television series. It sold to a network, caught on with the public and was renewed year after year. Ross had a good agent and got one of the best of the early contracts. He owned a piece of the property and wrote the scripts for many seasons. Later he became story editor and executive producer. Others wrote them, hewing to his guidelines. Royalties, residuals and foreign rights made him rich and he retired before he was 50. The series still ran in prime time and reruns were syndicated around the world.

Ross had married once but he and his wife had no children. They learned that it was he who was sterile. They joked about it sometimes, referring to him as the barren one, and once he signed them into a hotel as Baron and Lady Ross. Another time he registered as W. W. Ross, Bart., and Lady and during their stay some of the staff called them Mr. and Mrs. Bart.

They were content for a while but she always resented the hours his writing demanded and his refusal to adopt a child. On the day she turned 30 she divorced him and married a widower with three children by whom she subsequently had three of her

own. He remained friends with her and got to like her husband, a professor of American literature, who came to like him. The six kids knew him as Uncle Bart.

After he retired he collected. At first he sought copies of his old pulp stories in second-hand stores. He had written more than he remembered—detective, adventure, air-war, science fiction, westerns. Before long he decided he was indulging in narcissistic nonsense. He began to collect American first editions, specializing in former pulp writers who had made it big—Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, Cornell Woolrich.

He retired because his old friend Marv had told him to slow down. Doctor Marv had told him straight, not in his office but in his home after dinner in the presence of Doctor Tina—Marv's wife who'd just earned her Ph.D. with a concentration in gerontology. It was stress, high blood pressure, hypertension, whatever the current terms were, brought on by who knows what but helped along by overweight and alcohol. Smoking two packs a day wasn't helping any, either.

Marv had told him: "Quit the stress and do what you'd really like to do because if you don't—Just do it, Will. For me, if not for yourself. I want you around a bit longer." Tina told him please to keep on aging so she could study him properly now that she had her degree.

So he moved out of New York, to which he had returned after his long television stint in Hollywood, and went upstate, where he had been raised. He bought a house in Auburn, the small city which had been the home of Samuel Hopkins Adams, the writer, and before that, William Henry Seward, who had bought Alaska.

It was a fine old house. He filled it with period furniture, Adams' first editions and Seward memorabilia. He bought a few canvases by Auburn painters Barney, Rising and Sunter.

He liked a morning walk and a late breakfast at the Auburn Inn. He wore suntan pants and shirt and an old-fashioned vest which held pens, pencils, a slim notebook and paraphernalia for his pipe. He ate scrambled eggs, whole wheat toast, marmalade and coffee. Liz, the waitress, who was as old as he was, called him Will. He always tipped her a dollar.

From the inn he walked to the old brick and frame gallery on William Street to see whether Bob Muggleton had found anything of interest.

In his absence from the house Minnie Barnes let herself in once

a week and cleaned. Then she visited a friend who was serving a term for armed robbery in the Auburn prison. Minnie carried a Bible in a brown paper bag and often invited Ross to attend a service at her church. He went once and sat in the back row. He was the only white person there and although he enjoyed the sermon and the singing he felt like an intruder and didn't go again. He had put a hundred-dollar bill in the collection plate and made a note to send an annual contribution.

From church he went to an auction in a barn near Skaneateles and sat in the second row while bids went by him on cast iron banks, barbed wire, a mammy bench, post-hole diggers and a cranberry scoop. His only bid was on a Little Big Book based on his western hero. It cost six-fifty to take it home.

Home was where the heart should have been. He put his acquisition on a shelf next to old stuff he'd written. A re-run of his series was on television but he didn't watch it. He had a drink and smoked a pipe and went to bed.

His collecting led him to the flea market. Jud Ransom, a dealer friend, had invited him. "You never know what you'll find," he told Ross. "Too much of it is junk but I'm often surprised."

Jud had a shop in town. It specialized in mechanical banks, old typewriters, penny movie machines and other things that people collected now. The shop had a good trade; other dealers made their way to it from many states.

They went to the flea market in Jud's Econoline van, shunpiking at an easy speed and enjoying the scenery along the older roads.

"I'm satisfied if I clear expenses," Jud said. "I bring two or three fine pieces. It's good advertising; people notice them and take my cards. Weeks later they telephone or drop in at the shop. The rest is stuff I sell cheap."

At the First Original Famous Flea Market, in the lee of a farmhouse on Route 3 north of Port Ontario, Ross helped Jud unload the big table, two camp chairs, the penny machine that showed an early Charlie Chaplin short, an Oliver typewriter, a bank that shot a coin into a tree trunk, a cherry pitter, a broken spinning wheel and other bygones. The biggest was the old Gypsy Fortune Teller. They eased her from the van to a level place near the table. "Never could have brought her without you," Jud said. "Takes two to handle her."

It was a big rectangular box whose glass top enclosed a gray-haired wax figure of a woman in faded Romany garb. Her hand hovered over playing cards fanned out in an arc. A sign said: "Gypsy Granny Tells Your Fortune—5¢."

Ross put a nickel in the slot. Hidden machinery came to reluctant life. The head turned from side to side. The hand moved back and forth above the cards, then stopped. A pasteboard fortune fell into a tray. Ross read it: "You will do a good deed and happiness will result."

"Granny always has an upbeat message," Jud said. "She attracts trade and earns me a few nickels."

They finished setting up and relaxed in the camp chairs. Jud poured coffee from a Thermos. "Don't expect a roaring trade. I enjoy the fresh air and the people."

There were few customers that early. Dealers dropped by and chatted. One said he had a gadget that might interest Jud, who went to see it. Ross finished his coffee and lit his pipe. A few cars came off the road and parked in the field down the hill. A man stopped to look at the typewriter. "Does it work?"

"Probably," Ross said. He took a page from his vest-pocket notebook and rolled it into the Oliver. He tapped out: "My name is Oliver. Oliver Twist. What the Dickens—I really write! More?"

The man nodded. "When I was a boy I had H-O Oats for breakfast. There was a picture of Oliver Twist on the box, asking for more. How much is it?"

"The tag says thirty dollars."

"I see that. What do you have to get for it?"

"I'm just minding the store. Come back when Jud Ransom's here. Maybe you can work out something better."

"I may do that." The man went to look at a set of Jerry Todd books at another table.

A young couple came by. The girl took up the cherry pitter. "I saw one of these in Joel Salter's paper," she said. "See? The prongs go down and push out the pits and the prongs come up with the cherries and they fall into this thing down here."

"I suppose that means you can't live without it?" the young man said.

"Not if you want cherry pie like your grandmother made."

"We'll take it," he said. "Seven-fifty?"

"That's it, plus tax." They worked it out and Ross took the money, feeling as good as if he had sold a story.

Jud returned with an elongated wooden object that scissored open. It had grooves in unlikely places. "Nobody knows what it is but I never saw anything like it."

"Couldn't live without it?"

"You're picking up the jargon."

"A few people were here," Ross said. "I sold your cherry pitter and got a feeler on the typewriter."

"Good man. The price on the Oliver is firm. It cost me twenty."

A plump blue-haired woman in sun glasses put a nickel in the Gypsy machine. It whirred as before and the wax head and hand moved. But then it clanked to a stop. No fortune dropped.

Jud said: "Sorry, ma'am. I'll refund your nickel."

"I'd rather have the fortune."

"I suppose I could open it up and get you one. No. I didn't bring the key."

Ross said: "That's all right, madam; there is a backup arrangement. In case of malfunction Granny's message is transmitted to the keys of this venerable typewriter."

"Really?" the woman said.

"Yes. You see, the patent dates of the Gypsy and the typewriter are the same. They also happen to be the year of my birth. Thus an affinity is established."

"You're putting me on. But I love charlatans. For a nickel—"

"Make yourself comfortable in Mr. Ransom's chair and I'll see what Oliver has to say. You realize I haven't the Gypsy's years of experience in this work."

"Charming. Just make up something. It doesn't have to be Romany. A cookie fortune would do."

Ross took the other chair. He poised his fingers over the keys of the old typewriter. "You realize there are professionals in that line of work? They're the people who write greeting card verses."

"Well, pretend you're a professional and write me an upbeat fortune."

Ross bit his pipestem. He said: "First your name."

"Effie Ostrander. Miss."

"Excellent. The initials E and O start us off—Each of us has hidden talents; yours will help another."

"Lovely. Go on."

"As the sun shines on you today so it will for infinite tomor-

rows. May all kinds of ethnic fortune smile on you. Romany, Chinese or USAmerican, your happy future is assured."

Miss Ostrander said: "It's a fine message. Please elaborate."

"For five cents Oliver can go no further," Ross said. "Like most of us he has his price."

"Thirty dollars," Jud said in the background.

"That's for Oliver, not his words," Ross said.

"I must admit I've had more than my nickel's worth," Miss Ostrander said. "What would he charge to go on?"

"It's a question that hasn't come up before. A dollar?"

"Fair enough."

They spoke a little longer and this told Ross some things about her. He filled three pages, recapitulating events of the morning from her point of view. Part of it was about him. The last paragraph read:

"Miss Ostrander spent a dollar and five cents. She had the satisfaction of passing the time pleasantly in the open air and the bonus of having been the catalyst that fed Ross's springs of invention, making him something of the story writer he had been."

She took the typed pages and went away reading them again, her blue hair reflecting the morning sunlight.

On the drive home Ross said: "I forgot. I owe you Miss Ostrander's dollar."

"Keep it. You earned it."

Back home with his recollections of the day Ross thought he might go again with Jud but with proper paper and his own typewriter. Another Sunday he could set up his own table. It was a vagrant thought but it intrigued him. People would be there, each with a story. He could draw them out and write about them. For the first time in many nights he went to sleep thinking ahead instead of back.

It was early August at the First Original Famous Flea Market and Ross had had his own table for many Sundays. Jud, having seen him settled in, was off on a buying trip to Vermont. The weather had been wonderfully good. Not once had the dealers been forced indoors to the crowded old barn; it rained in midweek, as if the gods smiled on their Sundays.

Ross had packed a lunch. A chunk of Swiss cheese, a small box of raisins, a spiced beef stick, a raw carrot and hot coffee in a Thermos. And after the eating the reaming of the dottle from the

pipe and the refilling and the luxuriant lighting-up and the first mouthful of satisfying smoke.

Savoring his pipe, Ross listened to Mad Wayne Anthony's Victrola playing *Mad Dogs and Englishmen,* an orchestral arrangement of the Noel Coward song. Ross thought: No dog shall bark—Mad Anthony Wayne's infamous but necessary order as he prepared to storm the British-held height at Stony Point.

Associating, Ross thought for the first time in months of his friend Dirk Easterly and Dirk's dog Drool, a Labrador retriever who never hurt you when he gentled your hand in his jaws but whose saliva wet you in a loving way. In the presence of slobbering, loving Drool he and Dirk had signed a youthful pact at the base of a tree in the urban-bound woods of Alley Pond Park, Queens. Dirk said in 17-year-old solemnity: "One day one of us will need the other and we vow here in our blood—get down, Drool!—that nothing will interfere with that. There may be no one else to help—wife, dog, lawyer, friend—but each will know the other will come if needed, if the blood oath is invoked. This we swear, knowing all it may mean, whether we're a continent or worlds apart. You call, I come. I call, you come. This we swear, on pain not only of death, which is bearable, but of disillusionment, which would be too much."

Dirk read a lot and his language showed it. They had not invoked the pledge but in infrequent meetings over the years they recalled it, laughed about it and then, in an adult but not denigrating way, reaffirmed it. Laughing on the surface, as if to indulge their younger selves, but meaning it underneath they reswore, sealing the other with a toast to the departed Drool, their friend and bond.

People walked past Ross's table. He had a good place, between the lady with the treen, which is what they call woodenware in the trade, and the family with new and old books and prints. Ross had bought his Mrozek paperback from them for ten cents.

Trade being slow, he refilled his pipe and read Mrozek's story about spring in Poland, which was a season other than any he'd known. Ah, to be in Poland in such a spring! It was good to be here, too, close to the burgeoning fields, within earshot of a lowing cow and a squawking crow and a brook gurgling as heartily as if still fed by snowmelt.

Nevertheless he was marking time. There was more to be said than he had ever written. Long ago he knew he'd not write the

great novel or the immortal story. Somewhere, because he was professionally good with words, he knew there was a challenge to meet that would give him satisfaction. But there weren't as many futures now as when he'd been twenty, when the horizons were infinite. Since then he had spent a lot of time learning his trade until he could write almost anything passably well. But he recognized his limitations. Not for him the Nobel or the Pulitzer. His limited talent had earned him a good living but it would not bring immortality.

He was in this frame of mind, reflective, semi-sad but satisfied with what he had, enjoying nature's sounds and his pipe and taking comfort from the presence of his typewriter, filled with untapped tales, when the cloaked stranger stopped at his table.

Ross had known weirdos and freaks, as they called themselves. He could sympathize with their dramatic ways, having been one of them himself, long ago.

(If only then he had known his potential; the freedom to do anything that could be done! But he hadn't known. He'd been limited by his needs—to make a living, bring in the extra dollar, take the higher-paying job.)

The stranger regarded him with knowing eyes. "I know you and you will know me and we needn't go on about that now."

"Possibly so," Ross said.

"It's as so as I stand here. Explanations later. William Wylie Ross, will you, for the purposes of the story you will write, accept me on faith?"

"I have no faith," Ross said. "I've lived too long."

"Hardly long enough," the stranger said. "You are on the threshold. Believe this. You have been investigated and chosen, if you will agree."

"I think I know who you are. I don't know if I will agree."

"Tell me who I am. I'll be what you say."

Ross considered him, letting his mind wander. Another customer to while away the day. "Your name is Street. First name?"

"None. Or anything you wish."

"John? There's a John Street in New York, downtown."

"If you say so."

"You're one of the street people—once called beats or beatniks, then hippies, freaks, weirdos. You're a mystery man, a local character, odd but harmless."

"I sound dull."

"You roam by night, scanning the sky and talking to it."

"That's better. Does the sky talk to me?"

"Recently it did. You encoded the message on the back of a picture postcard of the First Baptist Church of somewhere. Whilomville? You signed it 'St.'"

"What message?"

"Decoded, it meant 'Contact established.' But what you wrote was 'Nothing new but hello anyway. St.'"

"'Hello' was the key word?"

"Probably. A postal clerk read your card and mentioned it to a friend, who told a reporter. The reporter didn't write a story but word spread that a man with long hair and a long cloak was calling himself a saint."

"Street abbreviated 'St.,'" said Street.

"And because the postcard showed the First Baptist Church there was talk that you considered yourself St. John the Baptist. There's John again."

"You do tie things together. Do I look like a saint?"

"You might pass. You're nothing like Simon Templar, of course."

"The name means nothing to me."

"I suppose not. They keep a sharper eye on you now, in case you're dangerous. A religious fanatic. A potential threat."

"Am I?"

"You may be a threat to our way of life. Because you're alien."

"My papers show I was born in Canastota, New York."

"Sure they do. And possibly your papers say you're seventh or eighth in a long line of Streets. Do you know Eighth Street? In the Village?"

"The village of Canastota?"

"Greenwich Village. Nobody'd give you a second glance there, among the street people of Eighth Street."

"It sounds more friendly than John Street. Why do you call me alien?"

"You're lonely. You wonder if you have been abandoned by your kind but your loyalty prevents your making friends here."

"Yet I've sought you out."

"Tell me why."

"You tell me. Write a story about it."

Ross considered it. He'd already begun, in his mind, as they talked. But it would take many pages—many more than the sim-

ple stories he'd written for Henry and May-Belle and Effie Ostrander. The stranger called Street was probably no more than he seemed—a Kesey-Kerouac type who had seen his youth go by, who had rejected the establishment but had been rejected himself by the new youth. An outcast, a weirdo now not weird enough. All at once Ross felt close to the man who stood there, tall, composed but lonely in his assumed grandeur, defiantly costumed.

"I'll write your story," Ross said.

"Thank you. It may be your story as well."

"Possibly. I rarely know how a story will end."

This is what the story writer wrote:

"A man at a flea market sat at a typewriter reading. His table . . ."

He wrote that and the other words you've read so far. Though he typed steadily it took him a long time. Street was patient.

People came by. Some paused and, seeing Ross engrossed, passed by.

Ross stopped typing. "I've taken it up to now," he told Street.

"Take it further."

"It's tiring work. I've written many dollars' worth but I've seen no money."

"I offer more than money. That's not your need."

"What do you offer?"

"Write," Street said. "Put it down now. Whatever you say is possible. What can you lose? An hour of your time?"

"Shall I write a fantasy?"

"Anything. Put it down and see how it comes out."

Ross stretched in his chair and relit his pipe. He drew in a great mouthful of smoke. As it trickled out he thought what he might write, half-listening to the cows and the brook and the old Victrola *Bye, Bye, Blackbird.*

"You hesitate," Street said.

"I'm a skeptic. Who can believe you?"

"Aren't you also a romantic?"

"Yes, I am. But what's better is that you've given me a deadline. I find that I want to do it and I will."

"I'll load your other pipe."

"Thank you. I'll want it." Ross rolled a clean page into the typewriter. He asked: "Anything?"

The stranger sat on the ground and stuffed the pipe with tobacco and tamped it well. "Anything," he said.

Ross began to write.

This is what he wrote:

Think of the possibilities. Ignore the likelihood that this fantastically-garbed stranger called Street is other than he hints he is. Take him at his word. As he says, what's to be lost?

Let us assume he's what he implies he is, how I imagine him to be, and let's get words on paper, in the old way, one after another, revisions later.

Let's take a 55-year-old hack writer with nothing in his future except more money than he needs and let's just imagine. What else is there to do this Sunday afternoon?

This isn't really the time or place for so large a work. Another time: late evening, when the mystery would be greater than it is here in the sunshine. Another place: home in privacy where I could bang it out in first draft with refinements and corrections to come.

But I make excuses. I'm a professional. I can do what I must.

Must I do this? No, but I want to. I can't explain. It may become clearer as I write.

Let me describe Street, my cloaked stranger, my catalyst. Not a physical description but what, for the purpose of the story, he must be. Let me pretend I am writing fiction, which is my skill or talent.

Street is a visitor here, or hereabouts, from a far-off place I'll name later. He has a specific purpose. Street needs me, or someone like me, or he'd not have sought me out.

He is a foreign service officer in his alien government; an important person not quite in the top hierarchy. I see him as the alien equivalent of a deputy assistant Secretary of State in the United States Department of State. A career man, skilled, dedicated, with limited authority in his area of expertise but with some powers of decision delegated to him.

We need a name for his government—short for easy pronunciation and typing, with an X in it for the unknown. Lux? Good in Latin, but here it's just soap. Lex, for law? As a freelance who once ghosted a Burroughs novel I think Lex Barker, whilom screen Tarzan. Sax as in Rohmer? Bix as in Beiderbecke? Max as

in Brand? Lox as with bagels? You see my problem. The name mustn't be associative or comic.

Street (obviously not his real name) is silent as I write and I flank the X with vowels—Axa, Exe, Ixi, Oxo, Uxu. One sounds like a weapon, two is a river, Ixi sounds icky, four is a bullion cube. Five will do. Uxu. Pronounced *ucks*—oo.

The Uxu had problems. (Past tense now. Shift your point of view, please.) They'd lived long on scattered planets to which they'd fled when their own world gave signs that it would be destroyed at the impact of a free-flying planet with an affinity for their world's magnetic core. Their calculations told them none could survive such a collision. So off they went in many small spacecraft to the many little worlds they'd tested and found congenial. There could be no mass migration to any other world; none within their reach was big enough for all of them.

So they migrated in different directions but kept in touch over the years.

And while they were apart they built a great ship in sections, a bit here, a bit there, which eventually was assembled in space, tested and deemed suitable for star travel. It was big enough for all, and capable of the extended journey there had been no time to prepare for when the iron planet precipitated their exodus.

Now a reunion was in order. No more diaspora. Time to put it all together again. The fatherland, the homeland, the promised land awaits, they told each other. It's reunion time, alumni, and alma mater calls. Sing the anthem, wave the flag, appeal to the ethnos. Let's regroup, gang. Everybody back in the house.

They all fitted in nicely, having reduced themselves in size, just as the separate parts of the star ship had merged into a working whole.

Now they were ready to roam the galaxies, going from sun to sun, comfortably self-contained as they sought a new world suitable for them all.

They had been on their way for many years when a great helic eruption affected their sun-powered engines. Their ship was tossed as by a tempest and they were thrown irrevocably off course.

Thus by chance they made landfall on this island in a far system, this Earth.

They had expected that they would be somewhat different when

they reached their destination but they did not expect a change of such magnitude—that they would suffer a space change, though "suffer" could be less than the accurate word. Their suffering was mingled with hope; they realized that the sun storm could have destroyed them and it was possible that the change they had experienced had benefited them. After all, as Ariel told Ferdinand some hundreds of years earlier, the change was into something rich and strange.

Some changes result from suffering. But suffer has another meaning; it means let. So after the great storm they let it happen to them, whatever it was, as their journey continued on a new course. The space change they had suffered, or let happen because they had no choice, was indeed a beneficial one. It prepared them for the alien conditions they had to adapt to when they got here and came to know us as creatures not too dissimiliar from themselves. Street's people had been modified to the way they needed to be to survive among us, in my world.

I tend to forget, as I write, that the truth is what I say it is in these growing pages of manuscript. I have no special interest except to write a story for him, to keep the keys clacking as honestly as possible.

The length bothers me a bit. At a dollar a page I wonder if he'll be able to afford my discursive typescript.

Street looks over my shoulder. He says nothing.

The Victrola plays *Where Is the Life That Late I Led?* A loneliness creeps in. For them? For me?

The world they found was Earth, and they began to make their home on it, in an interstitial way. But Earth was giving them a hard time because Earth was scared of them.

Who on Earth? . . .

Not the ordinary man or woman in the United States, China, Russia, Lapland or Uruguay, because the ordinary people hadn't heard about them. The frightened ones were at the highest echelons—the presidents and prime ministers, the semi-autonomous investigative agencies, the military, the foreign ministries.

All had contingency plans for alien contact but the plans were out of date. They had been drawn up first in the dark ages of modern diplomacy, when a Frenchman named Verne wrote persuasive extraplantary stories about the moon. Suppose some day somebody actually went to the moon and found a threat there? So

plans to deal with that contingency were drawn up. Later an Englishman named Wells excited people with a story about Martians invading Earth. But Wells's vision was fiction; real invaders would not necessarily succumb to the common cold. The contingency plans were updated. (They really have people doing this. You'd be surprised at their titles and salaries.)

Then a transplanted European named Gernsback upset them anew with a stream of publications from Hudson Street in which authors from around the world wrote convincingly of menaces from all the universe and beyond.

Then, in a relatively new medium, came Orson Welles, a theatrical type who borrowed from the English Wells and scared a nation one Halloween. Then came specialized periodicals whose writers told of interplanetary intrigue that threatened the well-being of Earth.

These visionaries made fictional but putative menaces cheap and available to the masses.

Not only was it necessary for the rulers of Earth to be aware of the extraterrestrial threat—it was necessary for them to make the masses see that they were doing something about it.

And so, just as in years past there had been appointed an atomic chief, a transportation czar, an energy boss, an inflation fighter, the great minds of Earth established a bureau to consolidate all the other bureaus that had been dealing theoretically with the possibility of extraterrestrial contact. And in their wisdom they endowed it with extralegal powers and gave it the code name Stab.

Some thought Stab was an abbreviation for Establishment but nobody knew for sure, and nobody knew who headed it. Nobody but a relative handful of higher-ups who saw to it that a public information office was set up to issue press releases that assured everybody else that everything was Under Control, that the Alien Menace, if menace there was, would be Dealt With.

In a once-popular parlor game the victim was told the others would make up a story he could reconstruct by asking questions. His questions would be answered Yes, No or Maybe. He was told the answers would give him clues.

He didn't know there was no story, that the answers were based on a formula. If the last word of his question ended in a consonant the answer was No. If it ended in a vowel the answer was Yes. If it ended in a Y the answer was Maybe. Thus the ques-

tioner made up a story of his own that sometimes looked into his subconscious.

I think I'm doing that with Street. I question him and he replies. But as in the parlor game I wonder how much of what I write is from my subconscious or my imagination.

It is decreed in their philosophy (religion?) that in a new land they will find a philosopher—a prophet?—and that although he will make great demands on them he will guarantee them security. He will protect them from potential enemies. Though his price is high it is fair because it will enable them to settle and regroup and rebuild and multiply.

They call it their future book. Maybe I'm not the philosopher-prophet their book foretold but I'm the best they have. They apparently searched far before they found me and I have to believe their faith is justified.

I'd like to quote from their future book—their *Tome of Time,* as it translates. But of course I haven't seen it. I know only what Street has told me about it; more accurately, what I've pieced together from his answers to my questions. You must bear this caveat in mind: all he has said has been filtered through my ears and into my typing fingers; my understanding may be imperfect but I must believe that what I write is true.

Street nods approval. On the Victrola George Brunis is singing *I'm Gonna Sit Right Down and Write Myself a Letter.*

I must believe what their philosophy holds: that only what is written endures. My moving fingers type, leaving a record that will not be erased. Because it exists it is so. It is so because it exists. It is true because I have said it and believed it. It stands as an addendum to the *Tome of Time,* the future book becomes present, then past and immutable.

Street nods: I have said it. It is written, as foretold, and joins other prophecies that control their lives and now guide mine.

I've suspended my disbelief to the extent that I see logic in this. It's an attractive concept for a man who's created a kind of reality from gossamer things—the idle thought, the 2 a.m. inspiration, the hope that vagrant words, inked on paper from ribbon or pen, will persuade their readers, at least during the reading, that such things can be.

It's not easy to say where the Uxu are. They're not physically among us on the Earth we know. It's a dimensional phenomenon. I can put it best in nonscientific words, the only ones I command.

Try this: Railroads dispatch trains in opposite directions over single-track lines. The runs are precisely scheduled and no train meets another at a wrong place. The dispatchers use sidings, bypasses, lay-bys; the terms differ around the world but the result is the same—minimum space accommodates maximum traffic.

In a more sophisticated way communications engineers find room in their undersea cables and telephone, radio and satellite circuits for more than one message at a time. What was once a single, or at best dual, circuit now carries many messages simultaneously.

There are lots of unused spaces. Dr. Dolittle used them when he wrote upside down between lines and in margins.

Factory workers used these spaces in World War II when housing was short and people on different shifts slept in the same beds at different times.

So with us and the Uxu. It's clear now that they coinhabit the Earth in a separate dimension, on a plane that they, but not we, have discovered. They coexist with us, sharing land, sea and sky, in the interstices of our being. Their heartbeats complement ours. We breathe in while they breathe out. They ecologize our waste spaces, utilize our not-yet-depleted plenty: two trains on a single track; hundreds of messages on a single beam; twice as many words on a page; twice as many people in a bed.

They're not quite here and only a few of us have had an inkling that there are aliens in our midst, interstitially. They're literally among us but invisible, as we are to them—except when they deliberately cross the dimensional border. Yet they're uneasily sensed, uncomfortably poised just beyond the threshold of perception. They're like figures in Escher's symmetry drawings—flocks of geese, schools of fish flying, swimming in opposite directions, one group light and one dark, each apparently unaware of the other and each taking up exactly as much space as the other leaves unfilled.

"Rest for a time," Street said (or I wrote that he said it, needing a few minutes away from the typewriter). "Stretch your legs."

"Good idea." I got up and headed for the old farm privy that had been reactivated for exhibitors and customers. At the cook shed I bought a root beer. Sipping it, I went round the tables, saying hello and looking at wares.

Mrs. Shearer said: "I saved something for you." It was a fine

old Autofiller made by the Schaaf Foundation Pen Co. of Toledo, patented June 30, 1903. "It doesn't fill anymore," she said, "but it writes a lot with one dip and a writer should have it."

"It's a beauty," I said. "How much do you have to get for it?"

"Fifty cents?"

"That's not enough, surely."

"It was in a box from an attic in Weedsport. I couldn't ask more."

Pleased to have it, I paid with a Franklin half dollar. I knew Mrs. Shearer collected them.

Nearby was Hester Goodbout's display of tramp art—old cigar box wood intricately whittled and carved and glued to form picture frames, jewel boxes, letter holders. A vanished and little-known craft only lately appreciated. I bought two pieces from Miss Goodbout, to give her some trade, and we talked about the art of homeless men who hadn't begged but had exchanged their special talent for meals or shelter.

Back at my table I looked for Street. He was not in sight.

I finished the root beer and looked at the sheet of paper in the Remington. Refreshed, I wanted to get back to work. I was annoyed at Street's absence. The devil with him; maybe I could go on without him. Was he not a saint but a devil? Was I Faust and he come to tempt me? Undeniably I am a latter-day Faust; before me there was a pulp writer named Frederick Faust, better known as Max Brand, creator of Dr. Kildare and millions of words of westerns.

The neighborly Victrola played the Furtwangler version of a scene from Gounod's Faust.

As a former story editor I knew there were one or two things in the plotline that needed fixing. I set the bottle on the table and my fingers stroked the guide keys: a s d f, j k l ; . . . I . . .

I looked beyond the flea market to the drumlin that hid part of Lake Ontario, shimmering bright on each side. The slope of the hill seemed to move. A slow down avalanche against the green growth. But not a dirt slide. No; a procession of people. A mass of cowled figures. A multitude in monk's cloth, moving down, coming this way. Thirty, fifty, sixty of them; I couldn't count. Far enough away to be indistinguishable one from another; near enough to fear. They were coming here.

On level ground now, they came determinedly across the flat of the land between. The outer exhibitors saw them and called to

others. Eyes turned, then stopped. Then everything stopped except the brown mass of cowled monks.

The other exhibitors had been immobilized in the middle of a gesture, a sale.

Only I had special dispensation, to type away, to put it all down.

The strangers came among us, faces hidden deep inside their cowls, and went from table to table, touching the goods quickly, moving on. One came to my table, bringing a chill breeze as a cloud crossed the sun. The figure stood at my side as if to know what I wrote. I strained to see past the shadow of the cowl but could find no face, only a darkness punctuated by what might have been stars, or eyes. The being touched the page in my typewriter and exchanged words in a strange musical tongue with another of its kind. All the others moved away. The visitor remained, the star-eyes as inscrutable as before, the presence as awesome.

The others moved back up the drumlin. As they topped its rise and vanished the flea market came to life. People moved, fingered goods, haggled, bought, moved to other tables. The Victrola played *When the Saints Go Marching In* and I gathered courage to look directly into the star-eyes of the cowled figure who had remained at my side.

I saw the features of a woman. I stood in greeting and regarded her frankly. She wore leather sandals and her small feet were perfect. I looked from toe to head and said, "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon," she replied. "I came as you would have wished, had you known me sooner."

"I know you now," I said, and dared to add: "You are Uxura. You must be."

"Because you've written it so?"

"Do we need a because?" I realized that she was not young, observing the sun wrinkles at her eyes and the smile lines at her mouth. I appreciated them, having creases of my own.

"Welcome to our Earth," I said.

"Thank you, if Earth this be. I'll meet you closer later, perhaps, through the barrier."

"I see no impediment between us."

"If you see that, so it must be. You are the prophet, the seer and scribe, the molder of our destiny."

"I write. I know little of prophecy."

"You know my name and I know yours, Mr. William Wylie Ross."

"You are Uxura but why do I know that? And you have most delightfully come, Uxura, but why?"

"You reply. Write it and we both will know."

"It may be known later, when the story is finished."

"It is in your hands. Let them make me a useful person. Let your fingers give me depth and purpose, to contribute to the peace and security of our peoples."

I hardly knew what I wrote, what consciousness guided my words. "My fingers write that you have already given much. Your husband, a great man, piloted an early Uxu ship. He died when it crashed in a test. You are Street's mother. Yet you are so young."

"I am proud to be all of these, except young. My son tells me you are the scribe the gods foretold, that you were always in our destiny."

"Waiting in the wings with a workable scenario? I can't really accept this god business."

"Then better for us all. Rather a doubting but well-intentioned godservant than an arrogant unfeeling one who delights in power for its own sake." She smiled. "I beg your pardon, but it is you who puts the words in my mouth—which longs to know yours . . ." She stopped in surprise.

"Really—" I said, as surprised as she at the reality of her saying the words that had been in my thoughts.

The presence of this woman who appealed to me so vitally and who said the words I'd dared not say aloud made me want to race ahead with the narrative, to reach the obligatory setback, to overcome it logically and get on to an ending, preferably happy.

There's not space here to describe Uxura. I'd have to ask many a man what kind of woman he admires. Twain's Joan? A childhood sweetheart? Doyle's Holmes's Irene Adler? Lena Horne? Margaret Sullavan? Amelia Earhart? The grandmother you ran to when your mother punished you?

Put them all together and they spell mother, wife, lover, companion, love object, sweetheart, the eternal woman. My feelings, still chaotic, about Uxura. So soon? So late?

If the women I've named are too old for you—I'm an old party myself—how about Jenny Agutter, Becky Thatcher, Tatum O'Neal, Peter Pan's Wendy Darling?

That much I wrote and, though much must have been strange

to her, she responded in an age-old feminine way. She drew my head to her breast and put her lips to my forehead.

It was more than an embrace. In that brief contact we exchanged two lifetimes of experience. I felt her life flow into mine and fill me with understanding of all she had known. I knew that at the same time she was absorbing everything that had made me whatever I was or believed myself to be.

In that moment we came to know each other in a more intimate way than I'd known any other, even—I thought of my marriage—even after living with someone for nearly a decade.

I learned from that touch between Uxura and me that the difference in our ages was far greater than the distance which had once separated us. She was not the young middle-aged woman of 50-odd years my eyes saw her to be, but three times that. Her son Street was not 30 but 90. I, a mere 55, with three years to live or a hope for twice that if I took care of myself, as Doctor Marv and I knew I probably wouldn't, could expect a lifespan of many more years on Uxu if I allowed myself to be transported there—to live not to an unfulfilled 58 or 61 but possibly to a robust 64 or 73.

This she told me in knowledge greater than words and this I believe.

Much more passed between us then; more than I can tell here; more than I could care to tell if I had all the space and time to tell it.

As we drew apart I felt we had woven a bond impossible to sever. Her warm glance said the same was true for her.

But then I wondered how many others she had shared herself with in such a way and I was saddened. She was quick to sense my thought. She touched me lightly, fingers to cheek, and I knew I was the first beyond her family to know her thus, and I was comforted. Even in that brief aftertouch, as I questioned why, she told me I was different, I was special.

I believed and was satisfied.

Thus my decision to go where she dwelt—I hoped not only for the pleasure of her company but to give her the pleasure of mine for more than a moment of time. Sweet Uxura. Selfishly I chose to go not for the wish to save our two worlds as I had begun to believe I might, not for the adventure of it and the new experiences I might translate into fiction; no—only so I could cling longer to life and in the respite cling to Uxura.

It was time to write an exit line for her, knowing I'd write her in again, and return her son Street to the stage. Mad Wayne Anthony's Victrola played *Somewhere I'll Find You.*

I delayed Street's entrance and said to Uxura: "You know we'll meet again? And that when we do there will be more time for us and for many other things?"

"Yes," she said, "but you write in question marks. There are things you must accomplish. Some do not concern me but others do, most vitally. You will say it in the writings. It is a charming quark."

Why had she used that word? I searched my memory and recalled that a physicist had invested some nuclear particles with certain wondrous qualities. He called these particles quarks, borrowing the word from Joyce.

Later other physicists spoke of refined particles they called charmed quarks that one day might help make clear to man the basic nature of matter. Then they combined a charmed quark with its negative number and produced what they called a charmonium.

Whatever the scientists postulated, their speculations ended in question marks, as most good theories should pending another Einstein.

But long before that a humbler breed of men had made quarks part of their everyday, if specialized, language. They were the telegraph operators.

When I was a cub reporter in awe of their easy professionalism they used "quark" routinely in their messages. It was an abbreviation that shortened their Morse transmissions, just as they shortened White House to WHU, Supreme Court of the United States to SCOTUS and, later, Nelson Rockefeller's recurring phrase "brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God" to BOMFOG. To these hamfisted realists, quark was simply the abbreviation of question mark. Play that on your charmonium.

I thought of Murray Gell-Man, James Bjorken, Theodore Kalegeropoulos and other physicists who pondered the ultimate. Uxura's amber eyes recalled me to the present.

"These things are beyond me," she said. "You among others control my destiny. I am glad we have met, Will."

Her token of farewell was a touch of her hand to my cheek. I gave her a warm symbol of my own, a kiss on that hand.

"When will you come again?" I asked.

"I'll be near when there is need," she replied.

I made that her exit line. There are needs and needs.

She was gone. Would I see her again? A charming quark whose answer I knew.

Uxura was gone and in her place was Street, somber, disturbed.

"I met your mother," I told him. "She—"

"No time for that. Is it true that your people plan to obliterate us?"

Street was casting a pall over what had been, all in all, a pretty nice day. Why was I letting him? I much preferred his mother.

He went on: "Can it be that such a plan, which we know exists, would be implemented? Are there those in your government so callous—"

Street spoke of a pre-emptive strike, a massive retaliation ordered by Earth's military chiefs. Angry, looking betrayed, he said it had been plotted by second-level people who nevertheless had the power to set it in motion.

He brandished a paper he called a secret document. I tried to get him to hold it still so I could see it but he talked with an intensity that was working into fury.

Finally I was able to take the paper from him. It was a much-Xeroxed Jack Anderson column from an unidentified newspaper, undated. What looked like a memo from one high-ranking officer to another had been copied on the same page. It said something like "Great opportunity to try out Plan P. Can we persuade K to consider?"

K might be Kronwald, a high functionary at the State Department. The names of the officers meant nothing to me.

I tried to tell Street that Anderson produced hundreds of columns a year and that not all of his informants could be believed. I tried to explain that chairborne officers in the Pentagon forever filled their time by playing war games. War was their trade, after all, but their games were just games.

"Policy is made at a much higher level," I said, and offered to seek out the facts from a friend who knew truth from talk and right from wrong and who, with his access to high places, could confirm that what alarmed Street was no more than a mongered rumor.

In fact, I offered to visit Dirk Easterly, who with his access to

the highest councils, could guarantee that my interpretation was correct and that the Uxurans had nothing to fear from Earth.

"You would go?" Street asked, and I said I would, happily, to reassure him if he no longer trusted me.

He demurred, saying it was not me he distrusted but others.

How could he not trust me, I asked, if I was their prophet? This led to a philosophical discussion that ended with renewed assurances of his confidence in me—but only while I was with him, where he could keep an eye on me.

"That confidence will be immeasurably strengthened when you are resident with us on Uxu," he said. "Your high friend will then protect you and therefore us."

"It is not my wish to travel to Uxu," I told him. I don't know why I lied.

"Nevertheless it is the only solution."

"You would hold me hostage?"

"That is not a word we use."

"Captive, then?" I was indignant.

"You are our prophet and scribe," he said. "We have agreed to that; you are one of us. Therefore you belong among us."

"And if I refuse to go?" I was careful not to say I refused. The thought of Uxura was in my mind. But I'd have preferred to travel to her land of my own will.

"It is not a question of going," Street told me. "You are already on Uxu."

What he said after that made it clear that I had been transported to his land during the time-stop when the wave of cowled monklike figures descended the hill. This meant that the people of my friendly flea market were not the people they had been before. They were duplicates of the original Earthpeople, mockups created by the aliens.

My indignation returned. I told Street kidnapping was a federal offense. I said I would not be their scribe under duress. I said he had betrayed our mutual trust. I told him I could not live away from my beloved house in Auburn, where all my possessions were.

As if to placate me, Street said I would perceive no difference. All I had known would be the same. They had duplicated my house and everything in it just as they had replicated the flea market.

"Am I to be a prisoner in my own house?" I asked, feeling less

annoyed. Thoughts of Uxura helped. Nevertheless I went on a bit: "Won't I be able to go to the Auburn Inn for breakfast? Can't I visit the library and museum?"

Street reassured me. Nearly a square mile of the territory around my house in Auburn had been duplicated in their interstitial way. Other requirements of mine would be met on demand.

I accepted the compromise, and told him so.

But why had I accepted? It was self-evident, now that I thought about it. It was my salvation as well as theirs. For them I was, if not a hostage, at least a guarantee that I would not let anything happen to them that I did not want to happen to me. The safety of their world depended on my well-being. My own well-being, indeed my future existence, depended on their environment offering an extended life expectancy. My days were numbered wherever I was, but the numbers were greater in the other land.

There were still other cards in my hand. I could set the terms. I could make demands. I could ask and what I asked would be granted because that was the way it was written in their book and I was the author of that book. I had only to take my fingers from the typewriter to wreck their plans. And so I asked, leaving it to them to agree gracefully, lest my reasonable requests escalate into demands which could not be denied. Mine was the pen that wrote their book of existence and it was a pen mightier than any sword they might wield. I ticked off my requests in a matter-of-fact way, as if to say These are the least of my needs, without which I cannot function, and there will be more, not needs but wants which I shall also expect from you.

Street looked troubled, and two or three times his face withdrew deep within his cowl as if he were communicating with a higher authority, but he always agreed, and I wrote it that way and it became our compact, our contract.

My reconstituted house in Ux-Auburn was not altogether to my liking. They'd fixed me up more faithfully than I'd expected, but it wasn't home. It had a desk identically like mine but it didn't have the shelves of books that sat on the back of my desk at home—the rarely consulted but comforting books where I could look up, if I wanted to, the name of George Washington's dentist, the date of the crossing of the Rubicon, the words that rhymed with sang, the number of miles between Coventry and Stonehenge, the descriptions of ships I'd traveled in.

There was my typewriter but not the folders of manuscripts I planned to finish one day. Nor was there the big box of articles I'd torn from newspapers for later reference. A bookcase I recognized was there but it was empty of the books and magazines and scripts I'd written or contributed to. There was nothing printed at all, although there were a few reams of blank paper.

This alarmed me until I found that my typewriter produced words just as it always had. I had feared that no written words of Earth could exist on Uxu. There are many of them here now but all of them are words of my own, most of them those of this work in progress.

There was a refrigerator in the kitchen and there was food in it and on the pantry shelves but it was their kind of food, wholesome I supposed but unfamiliar. They didn't replace it until I complained. Then they provided Earth-style eggs and bread and butter and milk and coffee and other goods I demanded. They were all right but not altogether satisfactory. It was like the difference between getting my copy of the *New York Times* fresh on the doorstep each morning (they couldn't manage that) versus looking at a microfilm copy in a library years later. There's something about the genuine article. The reconstruction, the duplication, the replica—none is ever as good.

And of course they reneged on the library. The building was there, an empty shell, locked, but I could see through the windows that there were no books inside. The museum was there, not locked, and pictures hung on its walls but they were not titled and there was no reference materials of any kind.

There was no radio in the house and I missed that. I'd kept mine tuned to a noncommercial station that satisfied my tastes in music and my daily need to know what was going on in the world.

I missed the voice of Terry Johnson, the morning man on Auburn's FM station, who told me the time and what the weather was like. His way of speaking sometimes amused me. He used the odd aural punctuation of Radioland—"From our bin of golden oldies we have brought you the music of (a pause, longish for radio) Tommy Dorsey and now the weather."

And I remember that once he'd said "At 7:30 I'm Terry Johnson." I wondered who he thought he had been at 7 and whether he would be someone else at 8.

There was no FM set in Ux-Auburn but something else spoke

to me. I became aware of it gradually. Many days had passed before I realized that someone had been communicating subliminally. Rarely to me directly but to me among others.

The voice, if it was a voice, never identified itself but I came to know the speaker, or rather the transmitter of the words or thoughts, as Exus. The messages of Exus reached me not by transistor but inside my head. He recapitulated the important events of his world, not mine, and spoke occasionally of me.

It startled me at first to be referred to in this public way, to be singled out by this commentator as one of the important people of their world. I record in this narrative some of my impressions of him.

On one of Street's visits I asked him to tell me about Exus but he only smiled as if to say You invented him, you tell me. But I feel it's more than my invention here; there is a person whose words reflect Vox Populi, the Everyman of the Uxu people I know only dimly. I call him Exus because the name embodies the mandatory X and because from him, through him, come the thoughts and comments of the multitude of Uxurans I have been thrust among. Exus distills their feelings and gives them artistic form.

Unlike Terry Johnson, Exus knew who he was at all times and I heard him whenever he wanted me to. One of his first observations went something like this:

"Eggs he wants, and books by Dickens;
We have to evolutionize to chickens
And reproduce endless novels
At the expense of unroofed hovels."

Who is Exus and what is he telling me?

In describing Exus through his words I give you an alien scribe, not unlike me, who synopsizes, compressing to stanzas what I'd need pages to say. He's a newsman of a certain kind, transmitting facts—sometimes flawed facts—fresh to those who hear his distillations.

I never did get the Dickens, or any printed matter and I had to conclude that Exus allows himself a certain poetic license.

My alien colleague encapsulates complicated events into little space. I feel I have come to know him. I can't reach him but he

reaches me. I endow him with certain freedoms of language and alien clichés. You'll grasp them in their context. Listen to Exus:

"Pens he craves and spending money
And a craft of bees he calls honey.
Halt the de-sal of a sea!
Hurry up and plan a bee."

But another verse was less harsh:

"I voice the words, the gripes, the woes
Of him who can't see past his nose;
Others see him as he's painted:
Our prophet come and partly tainted."

I sense a fraternal bond with this fellow of the alien airwaves. Both of us write. We seem to be of an approximate age, the fires of youth spent. That gives us a certain objectivity and a mordant way of looking at things. Neither is a hireling. We freelance, in the best and oldest sense of the word, defending truth and honor, telling what we believe is true. We may exaggerate, ironically, to make a point.

Still, Exus is dim, I'll have to limn him, get him out from behind the scrim of mystery and myth.

Where does he churn out his stuff? High on an alien hilltop, it may be. I like to think of him there, in a golden afternoon, far horizons broadening his viewpoint.

I use a typewriter, a relatively recent invention. His instrument is an ancient but superior device through which his thoughts roam, to be edited—much as I might X out—until in a more Ux-uran way they reach me and others.

I hear what he says and believe we think alike despite our differences. One difference is obvious: my words remain on the sheets where I type them; his fly to all his world—and to my ears now that I am a part of it.

Even as I write of him, he speaks of me:

"Is it worth it, many ask,
Bending to the ordained task?
Weighing prophet against loss,
Do we need you, Mister Ross?"

Exus has a bite to him, but he softens it:

"To steal his phrase, we knock on wood;
We need him for the greater good.
So let him have his precious bees
To put him at his proper ease."

Street visited from time to time to see how I was getting on, to talk, to know what I was writing about our mutual problem.

I was sorry for their troubles that I hadn't caused them. I was sorry for Earth's troubles too, if the Earthpeople's resources were to be diminished by having to share them with uninvited visitors. If there was room for both, I wanted peace between us; if there was not enough room—I thought of Abe Burrows' parody of a popular song: You came to me from out of nowhere so why don't you go back where you came from?

But then there was Street's belief that the Earthpeople, or some villains among them, were prepared to obliterate the visitors who had been tossed on an alien shore and who hoped only for peaceful coexistence in a land with plenty for all—but could it be that its fabled wealth was limited? That its bounty was bounded by human overgrowth? That its largely empty continents would be overrun in a matter of decades by its own burgeoning billions?

If this were true it was easy to believe the "documentary" evidence Street had acquired—the widely disseminated warning that a secret group of Earthpeople had decreed doom for the Uxurans —a secret strike by paragovernmental forces of a dozen major powers that would annihilate the storm-tossed, the spacechanged involuntary immigrants. The Uxurans had asked only to share, at no loss to anyone, the interstitial wealth of a world whose surface resources were finite but whose submagma and supratropospheric treasures waited to be tapped and could be, easily, with the knowledge the new inhabitants had brought with them.

We had always welcomed refugees, up to now. With certain exceptions we had taken in the homeless, the tempest-tossed.

But now some people in the hierarchy wanted to draw the line at alien aliens. Nowhere, they claimed, was there a mandate to gather flotsam from beyond the stars. They argued that this would threaten our own kind. We had had no compunctions about wiping out the anopheles mosquito, the tse tse fly, the screw worm. If we warred on fellow creatures such as these for the greater good

of the rest of us, how could we extend friendship to even greater potential threats to our well-being? So spoke the exclusionists whose words, interpreted by Jack Anderson, had so alarmed Street.

I told Street it was unthinkable that the good people of Earth, most of them mired in poverty, should be deprived of a bounty beyond their belief by the act of a handful of irregulars whose fealty was to the status quo and not to the promise the aliens—no fellow terrestrials—held out to them.

Street was only half convinced, although I hinted that the Uxurans' spacechanged engines, instead of mining the jointly-held Earth and the resources below and above it, could harness their power in another way and, with their interstitial ingenuity, blow us all to kingdom come.

Street said: "If your irregulars attack, you share our fate. If Uxuran engines can mine your land and ours exponentially, you share our bounty. If we answer Earth's attack by invading interstitially, Earth is doomed. You are with us and will share our fate, whatever it may be. That is why you are with us."

There was tension between Street and me; tension I didn't need; a sullen standoff.

Street has gained presence on his native Uxu. The verses of Exus refer to him often. I sense that Street speaks for his world virtually with full authority. He is far more representative of his people than I am of mine. If I could speak as he did we could arrange a summit meeting at this tired typewriter, manned by a tired scribe, and solve all the problems of two worlds. I acknowledge that I lack the kind of authority he has but he is content to wait, implying that as I chafe in my hostage status the solution will occur to me.

He is satisfied that as their prophet I will work out the details in a way acceptable to me and therefore to him. I am to be the Prince of Concinnity, with the burden of making gospel of a bold but unconvincing narrative. Poo-Bah's law. A dash of verisimilitude will do it if I can find the recipe, the key.

I find only the guide keys of my typewriter but am inspired to think Exus, my versifying colleague, may help. I address him directly. My words are poor compared to his but I trust him to hear the core of meaning. Exus the sweet singer of Uxu and Ross the freewheeling freelance of Earth, communicating in a trans-

dimensional bond, seeking to avoid a stalemate, looking for a way to achieve a common good that transcends artificial boundaries. My words flow out in an Exuslike stanza:

"Are we close, my alien poet?
Is there a chance that we can go it?
I think there is; the door's ajar.
Are we friends? I think we are."

Exus does not reply. I am disappointed. I am restless. I roam the house, unable to sit at the typewriter. I wander outdoors and pace the grounds. There is a lawn chair in the dappled shade of a tree. I sit in it briefly, then am up again. Without a book to hand I cannot properly relax; and there are no books on Uxu. Nothing to read except what I write, and I am growing sick of that.

I find the little garden I have started and abandoned. It is weed-choked. A shovel is stuck in the ground. I pull it out. Garden needs spading, I think. I shove it back in the ground. Dig is what a space does.

I chop away at the weeds. Work is what a man does. Cry is what a babe does. What am I saying? Mewl is what a cat does. Bark is what a dog does. Drool is what a fool does. Drool? Stab is what a dirk does. Dirk? Heal is what a wound does. Drool? Dirk heal?

I run to the house, to the typewriter. I write the chaotic words and soon Street is there.

"I need help," I tell him. "I am only half effective without my blood brother, Dirk Easterly." I tell Street of our pact, of our mute witness, Drool the dog. "I have invoked our solemn agreement. Obviously he cannot come to me; therefore I must go to him. It is the only possible way."

Street is dubious. I can see he is torn between my persuasiveness as prophet and the possible defection of his hostage.

"Then keep me here," I say, "but send my image. It will be as real as the people at the flea market at the time I joined your cause. Yet my true self will remain to share your fate if my mission fails."

Street seems to listen to words I cannot hear. He is silent for some moments, then agrees to my plan to go to Washington across the dimensional divide.

"It will be done; with your special help, of course," Street said. "Our programmers are relieved that no major recreation is involved. It will be a simple transsubstantiation, such as brought you among us."

"You mean I have to write it that way," I said resignedly. I was tired.

"You need not write it now. You will later."

"Oh? It sounds like a loan. I have to write it to make it happen. But because I will write it you'll advance me a trip that I'll pay for with a future account of it?"

Street almost smiled. "Describe it as you will. I believe your people have been known to trade in futures?"

Within an hour of my agreement with Street, after packing a small bag, I was set down, or I materialized—I can't describe it—at the end of the Glen Echo trolley line in suburban Washington. It had been my choice.

I don't know why I had wanted this means of getting to Washington. It stood to reason that the trolley line had been long abandoned, just as the Glen Echo Amusement Park no longer existed. Yet the pleasure of both lived in my memory; that must have been enough for Street.

"It's a nickel," the trolley car conductor said in answer to my question; "same as always."

I asked no more. It was a cheap and wonderful ride through the glen beside the waterway, the trolley bucketing along, its bell clanging at intersections or whenever the motorman felt like treading on the foot pedal in the sheer pleasure of transporting his passengers on a sunny day.

At the terminal I exchanged smiles of good-by with my fellow passengers and found a cab whose driver knew the old tavern where I was to meet Dirk Easterly.

Despite the many years between I recognized Dirk easily. He knew me too and with a clap on the shoulder led me to a booth where the waiter had set out two brimming beers in sweat-beaded glasses. I had been there last in the forties, when Dirk was off in the Balkans, or maybe the Baltic. "It looks the same," I said. "A little dustier, maybe."

"Nobody's dusted since Lincoln drank here, or so they say. Here's to Drool and the high school kids." We sipped in pleasure.

Stab (short for establishment?) was the bureau the OWI, OSS

and CIA had evolved into. It was a unit of the executive office of the White House and of the United Nations, sometimes written STAB as if it were an acronym. The hundred or so people who knew about Stab occupied themselves in trying to pin down its function by making up a name for the letters: Space Travel Accessibility Bureau; Substation Terra, Authenticating Branch; Search, Travel, Assess, Bomb; Seek Terrestrialoids and Beneficize; Section Two, Alien Bureau; Scientists Terrestrializing Alien Beings; Something Traumatic Always Begins.

Dirk Easterly, my childhood blood brother, was a civil servant of awesome background, respected or deplored by his colleagues, consulted by the President but little known beyond a small international circle.

Dirk and I had gone to the same high school and had traded copies of H. G. Wells and Wonder Stories magazine. We'd seen each other only rarely since that time. There had been occasional post cards to each other from odd places on our separate paths but there'd never been a call until today, when I'd sent him my message from Uxu.

We have had other bonds, he as a civil servant, I as a reporter. He'd known Tasha, who was Tito's woman in the Balkans, and I'd known Tasha. We'd both known Philip before he married his queen-to-be. We had played chess at different times against the same Russian who's been privy to the secrets of Stalin and Khrushchev and Brezhnev and we almost always lost.

He was Dirk Easterly of Stab and, as I had lately recalled, stab is what a dirk does.

His outward idiosyncracy was to affect the trappings of a Hollywood-style soldier of fortune. He habitually wore a belted and shoulder-strapped trench coat and a pulled-down hat and almost always had a cigarette going in the corner of his mouth. I must have seemed as odd to him with my deliberately Ronald Colman mustache, my Dolittle-like note-taking on insides of match covers and margins of newspapers and my flea market business card.

Our reunion was pleasant. We drank beer and ate peanuts and gabbed of intervening years. We spoke of lost friends and recalled how it had been when we were among a precious few who were convinced that man would reach another planet or that men of another planet would find us.

We recalled our youthful appreciation of prophetic comic strips. Young Dirk had pasted up the Brick Bradford daily strips. I collected them later in Big Little Book reprints at fancy prices.

We understood each other. We associated still.

"Nov shmoz ka pop," Dirk said.

"The Nut Brothers, Ches and Wal," I replied.

"Thimble Theatre."

"Segar. Popeye and the Sea Hag."

Our oysters came, reminding me of the Potomac and the Hudson, which recalled Stony Point. "No dog shall bark," I said.

"Mad Anthony Wayne," Dirk said. "Melville; Ishmael."

"Ish Kabibble. Kay Kyser's Kollege of Musical Knowledge."

"Old-time radio. Hard times. Two chickens in every pot."

"Pot. The grass is always greener. It's better on the other side."

"The other side. We have seen the natives and they are friendly."

We paused as the waiter brought a fresh pitcher of beer. He set down two clean clamshell ashtrays and took away those we'd filled with butts and dottle.

"I smoke too much," Dirk said. "I just noticed."

"Why worry? You could be run down tonight by a Treasury truck."

"Or an interstitial alien."

"So you know." I told him what I'd been doing and he told me much I hadn't known. I said: "It seems unreal, here in Washington, but obviously I've been doing more than fooling around in a flea market."

Dirk said: "We're making policy here. What I recommend will be approved because hardly anybody else knows what it's all about. Are the Uxu a real threat? If they are you'd better tell me now."

It was hard to say, I told him. "Maybe it depends on how much I demand of them. The more I require, the greater the drain on their economy. I try not to sap their energies too much when they're recycling waste or reclaiming a desert. But what will they do if they're convinced Earth is planning a pre-emptive strike?"

"They'll invade. Territoriality makes for inevitability."

"Only if I permit it," I said. "You see, what I'm scribbling here on match covers and what I owe them in manuscript is the definitive text. There's something cabalistic about them. What I write will happen."

"You're writing their constitution?"

"I'm writing something; it's more like their Bible."

"And what you prophesy will come to pass?"

"As in our Bible? 'Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter.' Revised Standard Version. Or, in the King James: 'He knows the future and is able to control it.' Others have said it. So it would be more exact to say that what I write is happening. Or that what I've written has happened. I'm their historian and when I say something is so, it's so. Irrevocably."

"You sound as if they've made you their god. Why would they do that?"

"I don't know that they have. Prophet, they call it. They seem to trust me."

"Is that trust deserved?" Dirk asked. "Do they know what we're talking about here?"

"They'll know what I've written. I owe them that. I consider you the guarantor of the stability of two worlds."

"You believe that."

"Once I wouldn't have," I said. "I do now. Maybe they'll include you in their prayers. The great brother god. God Brother of Stability."

"Would they offer up nubile maidens to me?"

"If I wrote it that way. Is nubile maidens what you want?"

"Not in groups. I'm your age, you know. But one at a time? That's a kind of benefit I don't get from Stab."

"Then you shouldn't expect it from the Uxu."

"Let the sacred writings show that I'm only kidding. Make me a small-g god with a sense of humor. Unless you're in upper case; then I'd expect equal billing."

"I don't want to be God or a god," I said. "I should make that clear."

"I'm glad you did because it wasn't clear to me. I'd better sort out what I'll have to tell the President. He may not want details at this point but I've got to be ready for him."

"What does he know so far?"

"He has the facts on the Uxu. Where they are—coexistent, dimensionally, with us. He isn't concerned about them now and neither is the Sec-Gen. You do know I report jointly to the White House and to N. K. Mboto, Secretary-General of the United Nations?"

"I've kept track. Then your guarantee is also that of the UN. Anything you've said, over beer and oysters here, is what Earth says. Is that right?"

"It's right enough," Dirk said. "But don't forget that if what you tell me about your prophesying is true, the Uxu are only an incantation away from being physically among us on Earth. So watch your language. They can have their interstices and we intend to keep ours. I'm depending on you not to write anything you don't want to happen."

"I give you my word, blood brother."

"Good enough. Somebody has to advise the White House and the UN on the interstitial situation. Stab does that. And for all practical purposes I'm Stab."

"With the same disclaimer, I'm Uxu," I said. "Then if you and I have a drink on it, it's as good as a treaty. Is that right?"

We shook hands and drank some beer. The stability of Uxu and of Earth was assured. There's a way of doing these things.

We went to Harvey's for a seafood dinner. Afterwards we got a cab and Dirk dropped me off at my hotel, where I wrote up what you see here, paying my debt to Street.

I finished typing my notes in the Washington hotel after leaving Dirk—fulfilling my futures contract with Street—and considered my return to Uxu. I was looking forward to getting back; anxious, in fact. I'd had my sentimental journey on the Glen Echo trolley and wanted a faster return trip.

The business atmosphere of the capitol almost made me forget that I had the means at hand—the rented typewriter I'd been pounding for an hour. I rolled a fresh sheet of paper into it to do a postscript. But I found my fingers writing:

"The threat of interstitial kill
Was lifted by our Prophet Will
In concert with unstabbing Dirk—
What a lovely piece of work!"

Unmistakably Exus. So they already knew.

Later I wrote, of my own volition, that I was tired and ready for bed. That I would prepare for sleep in Washington. That as slumber neared I would prophesy that I would wake in my house

in Ux-Auburn. That I would have a reunion breakfast among friends.

It happened.

Except that there was only one friend. "I'm glad you forced us to invent the hen," Uxura said as she served eggs, whole wheat toast and coffee.

I was delighted to see her but wondered where Street was.

She said she had sent him on his way. "He has much to do. He was glad to shed his diplomat's cloak and get back into his more comfortable laboratory jacket. His job is to halt the building of war engines and convert our economy to peace and trade with our new-found friends. There is much we can share with you."

We talked of that for a time and I said: "Then Street really is Uxu's top man. I rather suspected it."

"Yes; he's inherited his father's genius and whatever I've been able to give him. My son has done well and I'm proud of him. He has earned the right to be top man, as you call it. But he's not the boss."

"Oh?" I was confused. "Then who is? Will I meet him?"

"Not him," Uxura said. "And we have already met."

I could only look at her, wordless, as she poured more coffee.

"It was not always so," she said. "You told us of the space change we have undergone. We learned many things from our Prophet Will."

Speechless still, I lifted my cup. Then I said inanely: "You make excellent coffee."

"That too," she said, and smiled.

Then she said: "My instincts are important. I'm not just a woman—I'm Woman, from far back. And woman's instincts are more than just feminine intuition. Our whole experience shows we have age-old ways of knowing more than we are credited with."

I knew what she was talking about. I'd read in a journal that women had greater sensitivity to the character of others, a sensitivity honed by the needs of thousands of generations of silent subservience to the more powerful males of their tribe or society. The enforced silences gave them opportunity, more than their men, to be attentive to nonverbal signs, to store up knowledge thus learned and to be able to act on it in time of danger. Not only

mothers protecting their children were respected by the men for their instincts, but older women with acknowledged abilities became high priestesses whose canniness and prescience were respected by all in the tribe.

And then we talked of things that need concern no one else. There was a kiss of a kind different from the one at the flea market and we made certain plans . . .

And then there was a glimmering of subliminal thought that turned to words inside my head:

"There's a later bridge to cross:
Could you share a woman boss?"

I knew she'd also heard it. She was smiling sweetly, eyes cast down, looking almost girlish.

I didn't answer the question. I said: "You're not Exus too?"

"No, no," she said, "though he is all of us, as you said his name implies." She added softly: "You didn't answer the question."

"You must know—" I began. "I think I prefer to write the answer. I will do that soon."

"That will be fitting," she said. "I am content to wait."

"It will take only a little while," I said. "I'd like to go back to the flea market to do it properly. May I?"

"Street will escort you," she said and Street appeared at the door, looking interrupted. His mother explained. "It's our prophet's sense of concinnity," she said. "Take him there one more time."

"I have missed some of the narrative, being busy elsewhere," Street said, masking annoyance.

"You will know it later, at your convenience," his mother said. "Take him there now. It is his obligatory scene. We have our ways; he has his."

Street took me there; it was the place I had known.

One asks: Was my trip to Washington an actuality or was it theatrically programmed for me by the Uxurans? The question is academic. By their own rules what I have written is fact because I have written it. It is so. Ask Street or Exus or Uxura. Ask Dirk Easterly. Ask the President of the United States or the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

Ask ten-year-old Henry, for whom I also write.

Things happen or they don't. This happened. Has the sun risen? Does a bird sing in a tree? Can you go for a walk or kiss your beloved or pick up the phone and have a pizza delivered?

Everything is as it was, pretty near. What's good is still good and what's bad is still bad but, by and large, aren't you content?

We're coexisting with an alien race, not on our block but just around a dimensional corner, and we're still very much alive. Nothing has changed that wouldn't have changed anyway, for better or for worse.

Contrariwise, nobody is taking up cudgels against the foe. Nobody hankers today to go with pike and sword to Christianize the infidel, or to loose uncontrollable weapons to make the planets safe for our particular brand of life. Probably we've had enough crusading in foreign climes, minding other people's business when there are injustices of our own to correct.

It would be good if this were so. I hope it is.

In fact, the power of my word being what it is, I decree it.

As for them, their way is that of a peaceable people. As they borrowed my mind and familiarity with Earth to give them what they needed, so did I permeate their destiny to prevent them from harming us. And I've absorbed enough of their knowledge to benefit us all in ways that will be apparent in good time. Their space change has affected us as well.

They are as incapable of waging war on us as I am incapable of letting it happen in these writings. As Dirk Easterly cautioned me solemnly: "Don't let the moving finger write anything it couldn't cancel out."

"It's my finger he was talking about. I won't let it happen.

Is that a strong enough guarantee? For me it is. Either you take me on faith, you of Uxu and you of Earth, or you gave up on me some time ago. If you're still with me you must be convinced that a common-sense arrangement had to be made to keep things from exploding. And sometimes things are arranged by concerned people of less than the highest rank who are accidentally well placed, like Dirk and me.

It may be a flimsy reed to lean on but if we lean gently and keep talking to each other, all of us may survive.

William Wylie Ross was nearly at the end of his story. The back of his neck hurt because he had sat so long. He pulled the last page from the typewriter, put the sheets together and handed

them to Street, who waved them away. "I know all that you have written."

"Is that how it will happen?" Ross asked.

"It is the way it has happened," Street said.

Ross looked around. Many dealers had left and others were packing their wares, folding their tables. The Victrola Man was playing a coda: *Good Night, Ladies.* Few customers remained. The sun was low.

"It's hard to believe I'm on Uxu," Ross said. "Or have I gone and come back?"

"You are where you want to be. Call it Earth, call it Uxu, call it simply the First Original Famous Flea Market. They're all yours, you know."

Ross looked at the familiar land and sky. Cars went by on Route 3. A man took down the roadside sign that said Flea Market Every Sunday May to Oct. Park in Field Below.

"It's quite real, isn't it?" Street said. "Can all of us be merely the product of your imagination? Be satisfied. Hasn't it been a good day?"

"We've traveled in time?" Ross asked. "After all that has happened everything is the same as it was?"

"We are here, now or again. It is a good moment in time, which is relative, anyway. Why limit it by tense? You question too much."

Ross examined the scene he was told he'd made. He looked for flaws, for the possibility that it would dissolve like a dream or the end of a movie. Nothing changed. It was as solid and simple as any warm Sunday afternoon in the field back of the old farmhouse that was the weekly summer setting of the First Original Famous Flea Market.

Mrs. Ellis, from three tables away, brought doughnuts in a paper napkin. "Last Sunday the sugar glaze didn't go well," she said. "This time it's the cinnamon sprinkles. I know you like both. Give one to our friend."

"Thank you, Mrs. Ellis," Ross said. "When will you let me write your story? On the house, of course."

"Oh, some day when we're all less busy. I'll come over; I'll be your shill."

"Do that, Mrs. Ellis. Thanks for the doughnuts." To Street he said: "Mrs. Ellis used to work carnivals. She's a pro."

Street smiled at her. "I've eaten Mrs. Ellis' doughnuts before. Thank you, ma'am."

"You're welcome, Mr. Street. I hope you enjoy them." She went to pack up.

Ross stood and stretched. "I suppose you'll tell me I wrote that dialog in my head, on Uxu."

"Sure you did," Street told him. "Shall we go?"

"Where?"

"To your house in Ux-Auburn and all that awaits you there."

"How? As easily as we came?"

"Yes, or if you prefer, in your Volkswagen."

"Let's go, then. No, wait. Henry and his father are still here."

"The boy you wrote a story for?"

"Yes. I want to do something for him. Maybe he'd like my typewriter."

"Make it happen, then."

Ross sat and relit his pipe. Then he wrote:

"This typewriter, once for hire, is now at liberty. W. W. Ross needs it no longer. Take it and use it. Dowidzenia, Henry."

Mr. Ross had been in plain sight when Henry decided to go back and say good-by. But when Henry got there, after walking around a truck, Mr. Ross and the other man were gone. There was only the typewriter on the table with the note in it.

Henry asked: "May I have it, father?"

"He means it to be yours. It would not be courteous to refuse."

Henry's father carried the machine to the back of their station wagon and Henry jumped up on the tailgate. Henry rolled the paper a little and, using two fingers, typed: "Dowidzenia, Mr. Ross. Good-by, sir."

"Is that the end?" somebody asked.

"That's the end," Ross said. It was written.

It was almost the end.

Henry sat in the back with the typewriter as his father drove away. Under Mr. Ross's words he typed, just for fun:

"A man at a flea market . . ."

DAISY, IN THE SUN

by Connie Willis

Here's a wholly new idea in doomsday tales. There have been some scary novels written about what would happen if a comet strikes the Earth or the sun goes nova or a meteor shower intercepts our orbit, but this is not a novel but a short story and what is even stranger—it's not scary. On the other hand, it's not exactly comfortable either.

None of the others were any help. Daisy's brother, when she knelt beside him on the kitchen floor and said, "Do you remember when we lived at Grandma's house, just the three of us, nobody else?" looked at her blankly over the pages of his book, his face closed and uninterested. "What is your book about?" she asked kindly. "Is it about the sun? You always used to read your books out loud to me at Grandma's. All about the sun."

He stood up and went to the windows of the kitchen and looked out at the snow, tracing patterns on the dry window. The book, when Daisy looked at it, was about something else altogether.

"It didn't always snow like this at home, did it?" Daisy would ask her grandmother. "It couldn't have snowed all the time, not even in Canada, could it?"

It was the train this time, not the kitchen, but her grandmother went on measuring for the curtains as if she didn't notice. "How

can the trains run if it snows all the time?" Her grandmother didn't answer her. She went on measuring the wide curved train windows with her long yellow tape measure. She wrote the measurements on little slips of paper, and they drifted from her pockets like the snow outside, without sound.

Daisy waited until it was the kitchen again. The red cafe curtains hung streaked and limp across the bottom half of the square windows. "The sun faded the curtains, didn't it?" she asked slyly, but her grandmother would not be tricked. She measured and wrote and dropped the measurements like ash around her.

Daisy looked from her grandmother to the rest of them, shambling up and down the length of her grandmother's kitchen. She would not ask them. Talking to them would be like admitting they belonged here, muddling clumsily around the room, bumping into each other.

Daisy stood up. "It *was* the sun that faded them," she said. "I remember," and went into her room and shut the door.

The room was always her own room, no matter what happened outside. It stayed the same, yellow ruffled muslin on the bed, yellow priscillas at the window. She had refused to let her mother put blinds up in her room. She remembered that quite clearly. She had stayed in her room the whole day with her door barricaded. But she could not remember why her mother had wanted to put them up or what had happened afterward.

Daisy sat down cross-legged in the middle of the bed, hugging the yellow ruffled pillow from her bed against her chest. Her mother constantly reminded her that a young lady sat with her legs together. "You're fifteen, Daisy. You're a young lady whether you like it or not."

Why could she remember things like that and not how they had gotten here and where her mother was and why it snowed all the time yet was never cold? She hugged the pillow tightly against her and tried, tried to remember.

It was like pushing against something, something both yielding and unyielding. It was herself, trying to push her breasts flat against her chest after her mother had told her she was growing up, that she would need to wear a bra. She had tried to push through to the little girl she had been before, but even though she pressed them into herself with the flats of her hands, they were still there. A barrier, impossible to get through.

Daisy clutched at the yielding pillow, her eyes squeezed shut. "Grandma came in," she said out loud, reaching for the one memory she could get to, "Grandma came in and said . . ."

She was looking at one of her brother's books. She had been holding it, looking at it, one of her brother's books about the sun, and as the door opened he reached out and took it away from her. He was angry—about the book? Her grandmother came in, looking hot and excited, and he took the book away from her. Her grandmother said, "They got the material in. I bought enough for all the windows." She had a sack full of folded cloth, red-and-white gingham. "I bought almost the whole bolt," her grandmother said. She was flushed. "Isn't it pretty?" Daisy reached out to touch the thin pretty cloth. And . . . Daisy clutched at the pillow, wrinkling the ruffled edge. She had reached out to touch the thin pretty cloth and then . . .

It was no use. She could not get any farther. She had never been able to get any farther. Sometimes she sat on her bed for days. Sometimes she started at the end and worked back through the memory and it was still the same. She could not remember any more on either side. Only the book and her grandmother coming in and reaching out her hand.

Daisy opened her eyes. She put the pillow back on the bed and uncrossed her legs and took a deep breath. She was going to have to ask the others. There was nothing else to do.

She stood a minute by the door before she opened it, wondering which of the places it would be. It was her mother's living room, the walls a cool blue and the windows covered with venetian blinds. Her brother sat on the gray-blue carpet reading. Her grandmother had taken down one of the blinds. She was measuring the tall window. Outside the snow fell.

The strangers moved up and down on the blue carpet. Sometimes Daisy thought she recognized them, that they were friends of her parents or people she had seen at school, but she could not be sure. They did not speak to each other in their endless, patient wanderings. They did not even seem to see each other. Sometimes, passing down the long aisle of the train or circling her grandmother's kitchen or pacing the blue living room, they bumped into each other. They did not stop and say excuse me. They bumped into each other as if they did not know they did it, and moved on. They collided without sound or feeling, and each

time they did they seemed less and less like people Daisy knew and more and more like strangers. She looked at them anxiously, trying to recognize them so she could ask them.

The young man had come in from outside. Daisy was sure of it, though there was no draft of cold air to convince her, no snow for the young man to shrug from his hair and shoulders. He moved with easy direction through the others, and they looked up at him as he passed. He sat down on the blue couch and smiled at Daisy's brother. Her brother looked up from his book and smiled back. He has come in from outside, Daisy thought. He will know.

She sat down near him, on the end of the couch, her arms crossed in front of her. "Has something happened to the sun?" she asked him in a whisper.

He looked up. His face was as young as hers, tanned and smiling. Daisy felt, far down, a little quiver of fear, a faint alien feeling like that which had signaled the coming of her first period. She stood up and backed away from him, only a step, and nearly collided with one of the strangers.

"Well, hello," the boy said. "If it isn't little Daisy!"

Her hands knotted into fists. She did not see how she could not have recognized him before—the easy confidence, the casual smile. He would not help her. He knew, of course he knew, he had always known everything, but he wouldn't tell her. He would laugh at her. She must not let him laugh at her.

"Hi, Ron," she was going to say, but the last consonant drifted away into uncertainty. She had never been sure what his name was.

He laughed. "What makes you think something's happened to the sun, Daisy-Daisy?" He had his arm over the back of the couch. "Sit down and tell me all about it." If she sat down next to him he could easily put his arm around her.

"Has something happened to the sun?" she repeated, more loudly, from where she stood. "It never shines anymore."

"Are you sure?" he said, and laughed again. He was looking at her breasts. She crossed her arms in front of her.

"Has it?" she said stubbornly, like a child.

"What do you think?"

"I think maybe everybody was wrong about the sun." She stopped, surprised at what she had said, at what she was remem-

bering now. Then she went on, forgetting to keep her arms in front of her, listening to what she said next. "They all thought it was going to blow up. They said it would swallow the whole earth up. But maybe it didn't. Maybe it just burned out, like a match or something, and it doesn't shine anymore and that's why it snows all the time and—"

"Cold," Ron said.

"What?"

"Cold," he said. "Wouldn't it be cold if that had happened?"

"What?" she said stupidly.

"Daisy," he said, and smiled at her. She reeled a little. The tugging of fear was farther down and more definite.

"Oh," she said, and ran, veering, around the others milling up and down, up and down, into her own room. She slammed the door behind her and lay down on the bed, holding her stomach and remembering.

Her father had called them all together in the living room. Her mother perched on the edge of the blue couch, already looking frightened. Her brother had brought a book in with him, but he stared blindly at the page.

It was cold in the living room. Daisy moved into the one patch of sunlight, and waited. She had already been frightened for a year. And in a minute, she thought, I'm going to hear something that will make me more afraid.

She felt a sudden stunning hatred of her parents, able to pull her in out of the sun and into darkness, able to make her frightened just by talking to her. She had been sitting on the porch today. That other day she had been lying in the sun in her old yellow bathing suit when her mother called her in.

"You're a big girl now," her mother had said once they were in her room. She was looking at the outgrown yellow suit that was tight across the chest and pulled up on the legs. "There are things you need to know."

Daisy's heart had begun to pound. "I wanted to tell you so you wouldn't hear a lot of rumors." She had had a booklet with her, pink and white and terrifying. "I want you to read this, Daisy. You're changing, even though you may not notice it. Your breasts are developing and soon you'll be starting your period. That means . . ."

Daisy knew what it meant. The girls at school had told her. Darkness and blood. Boys wanting to touch her breasts, wanting to penetrate her darkness. And then more blood.

"No," Daisy said. "No. I don't want to."

"I know it seems frightening to you now, but someday soon you'll meet a nice boy and then you'll understand—"

No. I won't. Never. I know what boys do to you.

"Five years from now you won't feel this way, Daisy. You'll see—"

Not in five years. Not in a hundred. No.

"I won't have breasts," Daisy shouted, and threw the pillow off her bed at her mother. "I won't have a period. I won't let it happen. No!"

Her mother had looked at her pityingly. "Why, Daisy, it's already started." She had put her arms around her. "There's nothing to be afraid of, honey."

Daisy had been afraid ever since. And now she would be more afraid, as soon as her father spoke.

"I wanted to tell you all together," her father said, "so you would not hear some other way. I wanted you to know what is really happening and not just rumors." He paused and took a ragged breath. They even started their speeches alike.

"I think you should hear it from me," her father said. "The sun is going to go nova."

Her mother gasped, a long easy intake of breath like a sigh, the last easy breath her mother would take. Her brother closed his book. "Is that all?" Daisy thought, surprised.

"The sun has used up all the hydrogen in its core. It's starting to burn itself up, and when it does, it will expand and . . ." he stumbled over the word.

"It's going to swallow us up," her brother said. "I read it in a book. The sun will just explode, all the way out to Mars. It'll swallow up Mercury and Venus and Earth and Mars and we'll all be dead."

Her father nodded. "Yes," he said, as if he was relieved that the worst was out.

"No," her mother said. And Daisy thought. "This is nothing. Nothing." Her mother's talks were worse than this. Blood and darkness.

"There have been changes in the sun," her father said. "There

have been more solar storms, too many. And the sun is releasing unusual bursts of neutrinos. Those are signs that it will—"

"How long?" her mother asked.

"A year. Five years at the most. They don't know."

"We have to stop it!" Daisy's mother shrieked, and Daisy looked up from her place in the sun, amazed at her mother's fear.

"There's nothing we can do," her father said. "It's already started."

"I won't let it," her mother said. "Not my children. I won't let it happen. Not to my Daisy. She's always loved the sun."

At her mother's words, Daisy remembered something. An old photograph her mother had written on, scrawling across the bottom of the picture in white ink. The picture was herself as a toddler in a yellow sunsuit, concave little girl's chest and pooching toddler's stomach. Bucket and shovel and toes dug into the hot sand, squinting up into the sunlight. And her mother's writing across the bottom, "Daisy, in the sun."

Her father had taken her mother's hand and was holding it. He had put his arm around her brother's shoulders. Their heads were ducked, prepared for a blow, as if they thought a bomb was going to fall on them.

Daisy thought, "All of us, in a year or maybe five, surely five at the most, all of us children again, warm and happy, in the sun." She could not make herself be afraid.

It was the train again. The strangers moved up and down the long aisle of the dining car, knocking against each other randomly. Her grandmother measured the little window in the door at the end of the car. She did not look out the little window at the ashen snow. Daisy could not see her brother.

Ron was sitting at one of the tables that were covered with the heavy worn white damask of trains. The vase and dull silver on the table were heavy so they would not fall off with the movement of the train. Ron leaned back in his chair and looked out the window at the snow.

Daisy sat down across the table from him. Her heart was beating painfully in her chest. "Hi," she said. She was afraid to add his name for fear the word would trail away as it had before and he would know how frightened she was.

He turned and smiled at her. "Hello, Daisy-Daisy," he said.

She hated him with the same sudden intensity she had felt for her parents, hated him for his ability to make her afraid. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

He turned slightly in the seat and grinned at her.

"You don't belong here," she said belligerently. "I went to Canada to live with my grandmother." Her eyes widened. She had not known that before she said it. "I didn't even know you. You worked in the grocery store when we lived in California." She was suddenly overwhelmed by what she was saying. "You don't belong here," she murmured.

"Maybe it's all a dream, Daisy."

She looked at him, still angry, her chest heaving with the shock of remembering. "What?"

"I said, maybe you're just dreaming all this." He put his elbows on the table and leaned toward her. "You always had the most incredible dreams, Daisy-Daisy."

She shook her head. "Not like this. They weren't like this. I always had good dreams." The memory was coming now, faster this time, a throbbing in her side where the pink and white book said her ovaries were. She was not sure she could make it to her room. She stood up, clutching at the white tablecloth. "They weren't like this." She stumbled through the milling people toward her room.

"Oh, and Daisy," Ron said. She stopped, her hand on the door of her room, the memory almost there. "You're still cold."

"What?" she said blankly.

"Still cold. You're getting warmer, though."

She wanted to ask him what he meant, but the memory was upon her. She shut the door behind her, breathing heavily, and groped for the bed.

All her family had had nightmares. The three of them sat at breakfast with drawn, tired faces, their eyes looking bruised. The lead-backed curtains for the kitchen hadn't come yet, so they had to eat breakfast in the living room where they could close the venetian blinds. Her mother and father sat on the blue couch with their knees against the crowded coffee table. Daisy and her brother sat on the floor.

Her mother said, staring at the closed blinds, "I dreamed I was full of holes, tiny little holes, like dotted swiss."

"Now, Evelyn," her father said.

Her brother said, "I dreamed the house was on fire and the fire trucks came and put it out, but then the fire trucks caught on fire and the firemen and the trees and—"

"That's enough," her father said. "Eat your breakfast." To his wife he said gently, "Neutrinos pass through all of us all the time. They pass right through the earth. They're completely harmless. They don't make holes at all. It's nothing, Evelyn. Don't worry about the neutrinos. They can't hurt you."

"Daisy, you had a dotted swiss dress once, didn't you?" her mother said, still looking at the blinds. "It was yellow. All those little dots, like holes."

"May I be excused?" her brother asked, holding a book with a photo of the sun on the cover.

Her father nodded and her brother went outside, already reading. "Wear your hat!" Daisy's mother said, her voice rising perilously on the last word. She watched him until he was out of the room, then she turned and looked at Daisy with her bruised eyes. "You had a nightmare too, didn't you, Daisy?"

Daisy shook her head, looking down at her bowl of cereal. She had been looking out between the venetian blinds before breakfast, looking out at the forbidden sun. The stiff plastic blinds had caught open, and now there was a little triangle of sunlight on Daisy's bowl of cereal. She and her mother were both looking at it. Daisy put her hand over the light.

"Did you have a nice dream, then, Daisy, or don't you remember?" She sounded accusing.

"I remember," Daisy said, watching the sunlight on her hand. She had dreamed of a bear. A massive golden bear with shining fur. Daisy was playing ball with the bear. She had in her two hands a little blue-green ball. The bear reached out lazily with his wide golden arm and swatted the blue ball out of Daisy's hands and away. The wide, gentle sweep of his great paw was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. Daisy smiled to herself at the memory of it.

"Tell me your dream, Daisy," her mother said.

"All right," Daisy said angrily. "It was about a big yellow bear and a little blue ball that he swatted." She swung her arm toward her mother.

Her mother winced.

"Swatted us all to kingdom come, Mother!" she shouted and

flung herself out of the dark living room into the bright morning sun.

"Wear your hat," her mother called after her, and this time the last word rose almost to a scream.

Daisy stood against the door for a long time, watching him. He was talking to her grandmother. She had put down her yellow tape measure with the black coal numbers and was nodding and smiling at what he said. After a very long time he reached out his hand and covered hers, patting it kindly.

Her grandmother stood up slowly and went to the window, where the faded red curtains did not shut out the snow, but she did not look at the curtains. She stood and looked out at the snow, smiling faintly and without anxiety.

Daisy edged her way through the crowd in the kitchen, frowning, and sat down across from Ron. His hands still rested flat on the red linoleum-topped table. Daisy put her hands on the table, too, almost touching his. She turned them palm up, in a gesture of helplessness.

"It isn't a dream, is it?" she asked him.

His fingers were almost touching hers. "What makes you think I'd know? I don't belong here, remember? I work in a grocery store, remember?"

"You know everything," she said simply.

"Not everything."

The cramp hit her. Her hands, still palm up, shook a little and then groped for the metal edge of the red table as she tried to straighten up.

"Warmer all the time, Daisy-Daisy," he said.

She did not make it to her room. She leaned helplessly against the door and watched her grandmother, measuring and writing and dropping the little slips of paper around her. And remembered.

Her mother did not even know him. She had seen him at the grocery store. Her mother, who never went out, who wore sunglasses and long-sleeved shirts and a sunhat, even inside the darkened blue living room—her mother had met him at the grocery store and brought him home. She had taken off her hat and her ridiculous gardening gloves and gone to the grocery store to find him. It must have taken incredible courage.

"He said he'd seen you at school and wanted to ask you out himself, but he was afraid I'd say you were too young, isn't that right, Ron?" Her mother spoke in a rapid, nervous voice. Daisy was not sure whether she had said Ron or Rob or Rod. "So I said, why don't you just come on home with me right now and meet her? There's no time like the present, I say. Isn't that right, Ron?"

He was not embarrassed by her at all. "Would you like to go get a coke, Daisy? I've got my car here."

"Of course she wants to go. Don't you, Daisy?"

No. She wished the sun would reach out lazily, the great golden bear, and swat them all away. Right now.

"Daisy," her mother said, hastily brushing at her hair with her fingers. "There's so little time left. I wanted you to have—" *Darkness and blood. You wanted me to be as frightened as you are. Well, I'm not, Mother. It's too late. We're almost there now.*

But when she went outside with him, she saw his convertible parked at the curb, and she felt the first faint flutter of fear. It had the top down. She looked up at his tanned, easily smiling face, and thought, "He isn't afraid."

"Where do you want to go, Daisy?" he asked. He had his bare arm across the back of the seat. He could easily move it from there to around her shoulders. Daisy sat against the door, her arms wrapped around her chest.

"I'd like to go for a ride. With the top down. I love the sun," she said to frighten him, to see the same expression she could see on her mother's face when Daisy told her lies about the dreams.

"Me, too," he said. "It sounds like you don't believe all that garbage they feed us about the sun, either. It's a lot of scare talk, that's all. You don't see me getting skin cancer, do you?" He moved his golden-tanned arm lazily around her shoulder to show her. "A lot of people getting hysterical for nothing. My physics teacher says the sun could emit neutrinos at the present rate for five thousand years before the sun would collapse. All this stuff about the aurora borealis. Geez, you'd think these people had never seen a solar flare before. There's nothing to be afraid of, Daisy-Daisy."

He moved his arm dangerously close to her breast.

"Do you have nightmares?" she asked him, desperate to frighten him.

"No. All my dreams are about you." His fingers traced a pattern, casually, easily on her blouse. "What do you dream about?"

She thought she would frighten him like she frightened her mother. Her dreams always seemed so beautiful, but when she began to tell them to her mother, her mother's eyes became wide and dark with fear. And then Daisy would change the dream, make it sound worse than it was, ruin its beauty to make it frighten her mother.

"I dreamed I was rolling a golden hoop. It was hot. It burned my hand whenever I touched it. I was wearing earrings, like golden hoops in my ears that spun like the hoop when I ran. And a golden bracelet." She watched his face as she told him, to see the fear. He traced the pattern aimlessly with his finger, closer and closer to the nipple of her breast.

"I rolled the hoop down a hill and it started rolling faster and faster. I couldn't keep up with it. It rolled on by itself, like a wheel, a golden wheel, rolling over everything."

She had forgotten her purpose. She had told the dream as she remembered it, with the little secret smile at the memory. His hand had closed over her breast and rested there, warm as the sun on her face.

He looked as if he didn't know it was there. "Boy, my psych teacher would have a ball with that one! Who would think a kid like you could have a sexy dream like that? Wow! Talk about Freudian! My psych teacher says—"

"You think you know everything, don't you?" Daisy said.

His fingers traced the nipple through her thin blouse, tracing a burning circle, a tiny burning hoop.

"Not quite," he said, and bent close to her face. Darkness and blood. "I don't know quite how to take you."

She wrenched free of his face, free of his arm. "You won't take me at all. Not ever. You'll be dead. We'll all be dead in the sun," she said, and flung herself out of the convertible and back into the darkened house.

Daisy lay doubled up on the bed for a long time after the memory was gone. She would not talk to him anymore. She could not remember anything without him, but she did not care. It was all a dream anyway. What did it matter? She hugged her arms to her.

It was not a dream. It was worse than a dream. She sat very

straight on the edge of the bed, her head up and her arms at her side, her feet together on the floor, the way a young lady was supposed to sit. When she stood up, there was no hesitation in her manner. She walked straight to the door and opened it. She did not stop to see what room it was. She did not even glance at the strangers milling up and down. She went straight to Ron and put her hand on his shoulder.

"This is hell, isn't it?"

He turned and there was something like hope on his face. "Why, Daisy!" he said, and took her hands and pulled her down to sit beside him. It was the train. Their folded hands rested on the white damask tablecloth. She looked at the hands. There was no use trying to pull away.

Her voice did not shake. "I was very unkind to my mother. I used to tell her my dreams just to make her frightened. I used to go out without a hat, just because it scared her so much. She—couldn't help it. She was so afraid the sun would explode." She stopped and looked at her hands. "I think it did explode and everybody died, like my father said. I think . . . I should have lied to her about the dreams. I should have told her I dreamed about boys, about growing up, about things that didn't frighten her. I could have made up nightmares like my brother did."

"Daisy," he said. "I'm afraid confessions aren't quite in my line. I don't—"

"She killed herself," Daisy said. "She sent us to my grandmother's in Canada and then she killed herself. And so I think that if we are all dead, then I went to hell. That's what hell is, isn't it? Coming face to face with what you're most afraid of."

"Or what you love. Oh, Daisy," he said, holding her fingers tightly. "Whatever made you think that this was hell?"

In her surprise, she looked straight into his eyes. "Because there isn't any sun," she said.

His eyes burned her, burned her. She felt blindly for the white-covered table, but the room had changed. She could not find it. He pulled her down beside him on the blue couch. With him still clinging to her hands, still holding onto her, she remembered.

They were being sent away, to protect them from the sun. Daisy was just as glad to go. Her mother was angry with her all the time. She forced Daisy to tell her her dreams, every morning at breakfast in the dark living room. Her mother had put black-

out curtains up over the blinds so that no light got in at all, and in the blue twilight not even the little summer slants of light from the blinds fell on her mother's frightened face.

There was nobody on the beaches. Her mother would not let her go out, even to the grocery store, without a hat and sunglasses. She would not let them fly to Canada. She was afraid of magnetic storms. They sometimes interrupted the radio signals from the towers. Her mother was afraid the plane would crash.

She sent them on the train, kissing them goodbye at the train station, for the moment oblivious to the long dusty streaks of light from the vaulted train-station windows. Her brother went ahead of them out to the platform, and her mother pulled Daisy suddenly into a dark shadowed corner. "What I told you before, about your period, that won't happen now. The radiation—I called the doctor and he said not to worry. It's happening to everyone."

Again Daisy felt the faint pull of fear. Her period had started months ago, dark and bloody as she had imagined. She had not told anyone. "I won't worry," she said.

"Oh, my Daisy," her mother said suddenly. "My Daisy in the sun," and seemed to shrink back into the darkness. But as they pulled out of the station, she came out into the direct sun and waved goodbye to them.

It was wonderful on the train. The few passengers stayed in their cabins with the shades drawn. There were no shades in the dining room, no people to tell Daisy to get out of the sunlight. She sat in the deserted dining car and looked out the wide windows. The train flew through forests, then branch forests of spindly pines and aspens. The sun flickered in on Daisy—sun and then shadows and then sun, running across her face. She and her brother ordered an orgy of milkshakes and desserts and nobody said anything to them.

Her brother read his books about the sun out loud to her. "Do you know what it's like in the middle of the sun?" he asked her. *Yes. You stand with a bucket and a shovel and your bare toes digging into the sand, a child again, not afraid, squinting up into the yellow light.*

"No," she said.

"Atoms can't even hold together in the middle of the sun. It's so crowded they bump into each other all the time, bump bump bump, like that, and their electrons fly off and run around free.

Sometimes when there's a collision, it lets off an X-ray that goes *whoosh,* all the way out at the speed of light, like a ball in a pinball machine. *Bing-bang-bing,* all the way to the surface."

"Why do you read those books anyway? To scare yourself?"

"No. To scare Mom." That was a daring piece of honesty, suitable not even for the freedom of Grandma's, suitable only for the train. She smiled at him.

"You're not even scared, are you?"

She felt obliged to answer him with equal honesty. "No," she said, "not at all."

"Why not?"

Because it won't hurt. Because I won't remember afterwards. Because I'll stand in the sun with my bucket and shovel and look up and not be frightened. "I don't know," Daisy said. "I'm just not."

"I am. I dream about burning all the time. I think about how much it hurts when I burn my finger and then I dream about it hurting like that all over forever." He had been lying to their mother about his dreams, too.

"It won't be like that," Daisy said. "We won't even know it's happened. We won't remember a thing."

"When the sun goes nova, it'll start using itself up. The core will start filling up with atomic ash, and that'll make the sun start using up all its own fuel. Do you know it's pitch dark in the middle of the sun? See, the radiations are X-rays, and they're too short to see. They're invisible. Pitch dark and ashes falling around you. Can you imagine that?"

"It doesn't matter." They were passing a meadow and Daisy's face was full in the sun. "We won't be there. We'll be dead. We won't remember anything."

Daisy had not realized how relieved she would be to see her grandmother, narrow face sunburned, arms bare. She was not even wearing a hat. "Daisy, dear, you're growing up," she said. She did not make it sound like a death sentence. "And David, you still have your nose in a book, I see."

It was nearly dark when they got to her little house. "What's that?" David asked, standing on the porch.

Her grandmother's voice did not rise dangerously at all. "The aurora borealis. I tell you, we've had some shows up here lately. It's like the Fourth of July."

Daisy had not realized how hungry she had been to hear some-

one who was not afraid. She looked up. Great red curtains of light billowed almost to the zenith, fluttering in some solar wind. "It's beautiful," Daisy whispered, but her grandmother was holding the door open for her to go in, and so happy was she to see the clear light in her grandmother's eyes, she followed her into the little kitchen with its red linoleum table and the red curtains hanging at the windows.

"It is so nice to have company," her grandmother said, climbing onto a chair. "Daisy, hold this end, will you?" She dangled the long end of a yellow plastic ribbon down to Daisy. Daisy took it, looking anxiously at her grandmother. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Measuring for new curtains, dear," she said, reaching into her pocket for a slip of paper and a pencil. "What's the length, Daisy?"

"Why do you need new curtains?" Daisy asked. "These look fine to me."

"They don't keep the sun out," her grandmother said. Her eyes had gone coal-black with fear. Her voice was rising with every word. "We have to have new curtains, Daisy, and there's no cloth. Not in the whole town, Daisy. Can you imagine that? We had to send to Ottawa. They bought up all the cloth in town. Can you imagine that, Daisy?"

"Yes," Daisy said, and wished she could be afraid.

Ron still held her hands tightly. She looked steadily at him.

"Warmer, Daisy," he said. "Almost here."

"Yes," she said.

He untwined her fingers and rose from the couch. He walked through the crowd in the blue living room and went out the door into the snow. She did not try to go to her room. She watched them all, the strangers in their endless, random movement, her brother walking while he read, her grandmother standing on a chair, and the memory came quite easily and without pain.

"You wanta see something?" her brother asked.

Daisy was looking out the window. All day long the lights had been flickering, even though it was calm and silent outside. Their grandmother had gone to town to see if the fabric for the curtains had come in. Daisy did not answer him.

He shoved the book in front of her face. "That's a promi-

nence," he said. The pictures were in black and white, like old-fashioned snapshots, only under them instead of her mother's scrawled white ink it said, "High Altitude Observatory, Boulder, Colorado."

"That's an eruption of hot gas hundreds of thousands of feet high."

"No," Daisy said, taking the book into her own lap. "That's my golden hoop. I saw it in my dream."

She turned the page.

David leaned over her shoulder and pointed. "That was the big eruption in 1946 when it first started to go wrong only they didn't know it yet. It weighed a billion tons. The gas went out a million miles."

Daisy held the book like a snapshot of a loved one.

"It just went, *bash,* and knocked all this gas out into space. There were all kinds of—"

"It's my golden bear," she said. The great paw of flame reached lazily out from the sun's black surface in the picture, the wild silky paw of flaming gas.

"This is the stuff you've been dreaming?" her brother asked. "This is the stuff you've been telling me about?" His voice went higher and higher. "I thought you said the dreams were nice."

"They were," Daisy said.

He pulled the book away from her and flipped angrily through the pages to a colored diagram on a black ground. It showed a glowing red ball with concentric circles drawn inside it. "There," he said, shoving it at Daisy. "That's what's going to happen to us." He jabbed angrily at one of the circles inside the red ball. "That's us. That's us! Inside the sun! Dream about that, why don't you?"

He slammed the book shut.

"But we'll all be dead, so it won't matter," Daisy said. "It won't hurt. We won't remember anything."

"That's what you think! You think you know everything. Well, you don't know what anything is. I read a book about it and you know what it said? They don't know what memory is. They think maybe it isn't even in the brain cells. That it's in the atoms somewhere and even if we're blown apart that memory stays. What if we do get burned by the sun and we still remember? What if we go on burning and burning and remembering and remembering forever?"

Daisy said quietly. "He wouldn't do that. He wouldn't hurt us." There had been no fear as she stood digging her toes into the sand and looking up at him, only wonder. "He—"

"You're crazy!" her brother shouted. "You know that? You're crazy. You talk about him like he's your boyfriend or something! It's the sun, the wonderful sun who's going to kill us all!" He yanked the book away from her. He was crying.

"I'm sorry," Daisy was about to say, but their grandmother came in just then, hatless, with her hair blowing around her thin sunburned face.

"They got the material in," she said jubilantly. "I bought enough for all the windows." She spilled out two sacks of red gingham. It billowed out across the table like the northern lights, red over red. "I thought it would never get here."

Daisy reached out to touch it.

She waited for him, sitting at the white-damask table of the dining car. He hesitated at the door, standing framed by the snow of ash behind him, and then came gaily in, singing.

"Daisy, Daisy, give me your theory do," he sang. He carried in his arms a bolt of red cloth. It billowed out from the bolt as he handed it to her grandmother—she standing on the chair, transfixed by joy, the pieces of paper, the yellow tape measure fallen from her forever.

Daisy came and stood in front of him.

"Daisy, Daisy," he said gaily. "Tell me—"

She put her hand on his chest. "No theory," she said. "I know."

"Everything, Daisy?" He smiled the easy, lopsided smile, and she thought sadly that even knowing, she would not be able to see him as he was, but only as the boy who had worked at the grocery store, the boy who had known everything.

"No, but I think I know." She held her hand firmly against his chest, over the flaming hoop of his breast. "I don't think we are people anymore. I don't know what we are—atoms stripped of our electrons maybe, colliding endlessly against each other in the center of the sun while it burns itself to ash in the endless snowstorm at its heart."

He gave her no clue. His smile was still confident, easy. "What about me, Daisy?" he asked.

"I think you are my golden bear, my flaming hoop, I think you

are Ra, with no end to your name at all, Ra who knows everything."

"And who are you?"

"I am Daisy, who loved the sun."

He did not smile, did not change his mocking expression. But his tanned hand closed over hers, still pushing against his chest.

"What will I be now, an X-ray zigzagging all the way to the surface till I turn into light? Where will you take me after you have taken me? To Saturn, where the sun shines on the cold rings till they melt into happiness? Is that where you shine now, on Saturn? Will you take me there? Or will we stand forever like this, me with my bucket and shovel, squinting up at you?"

Slowly, he gave her hand back to her. "Where do you want to go, Daisy?"

Her grandmother still stood on the chair, holding the cloth as if it were a benediction. Daisy reached out and touched the cloth, as she had in the moment when the sun went nova. She smiled up at her grandmother. "It's beautiful," she said. "I'm so glad it's come."

She bent suddenly to the window and pulled the faded curtains aside, as if she thought because she knew she might be granted some sort of vision, might see for some small moment the little girl that was herself—with her little girl's chest and toddler's stomach—might see herself as she really was: Daisy, in the sun. But all she could see was the endless snow.

Her brother was reading on the blue couch in her mother's living room. She stood over him, watching him read. "I'm afraid now," Daisy said, but it wasn't her brother's face that looked back at her.

"All right, then," Daisy thought. "None of them are any help. It doesn't matter. I have come face to face with what I fear and what I love and they are the same thing."

"All right, then," Daisy said, and turned back to Ron. "I'd like to go for a ride. With the top down." She stopped and squinted up at him. "I love the sun," she said.

When he put his arm around her shoulder, she did not move away. His hand closed on her breast and he bent down to kiss her.

THE LOCUSTS

by Larry Niven and Steve Barnes

Once again what is the proper adjustment of humanity to its planet? Maybe our troubles are caused by having too large a brain for the environment in which we dwell. Or maybe that large brain is for the purpose of emigrating elsewhere so that the readjustment of humanity can take place under uncrowded conditions just like those at the dawn of time. Utopia, no. Not to our way of thinking. But peace and a full stomach—possibly yes. Nature's way is not necessarily all art and beauty.

There are no men on Tau Ceti IV.

Near the equator on the ridged ribbon of continent which reaches north and south to cover both poles, the evidence of Man still shows. There is the landing craft, a great thick saucer with a rounded edge, gaping doors and vast empty space inside. Ragged clumps of grass and scrub vegetation surround its base, now. There is the small town where they lived, grew old, and died: tall stone houses, a main street of rock fused with atomic fire, a good deal of machinery whose metal is still bright. There is the land itself, overgrown but still showing the traces of a square arrangement that once marked it as farmland.

And there is the forest, reaching north and south along the sprawling ribbon of continent, spreading even to the innumerable islands which form two-thirds of Ridgeback's land mass. Where

forest cannot grow, because of insufficient water or because the carefully bred bacteria have not yet built a sufficient depth of topsoil, there is grass, an exceptionally hardy hybrid of Buffalo and Cord with an abnormal number of branding roots, developing a dense and fertile sod.

There are flocks of moas, resurrected from a lost New Zealand valley. The great flightless birds roam freely, sharing their grazing land with expanding herds of wild cattle and buffalo.

There are things in the forest. They prefer it there, but will occasionally shamble out into the grasslands and sometimes even into the town. They themselves do not understand why they go: there is no food, and they do not need building materials or other things which may be there for the scavenging. They always leave the town before nightfall arrives.

When men came the land was as barren as a tabletop.

Doc and Elise were among the last to leave the ship. He took his wife's hand and walked down the ramp, some little-boy part of him eager to feel alien loam between his toes. He kept his shoes on. They'd have to make the loam first.

The other colonists were exceptionally silent, as if each were afraid to speak. Not surprising, Doc thought. The first words spoken on Ridgeback would become history.

The robot probes had found five habitable worlds besides Ridgeback in Earth's neighborhood. Two held life in more or less primitive stages, but Ridgeback was perfect. There was one-celled life in Ridgeback's seas, enough to give the planet an oxygenating atmosphere; and no life at all on land. They would start with a clean slate.

So the biologists had chosen what they believed was a representative and balanced ecology. A world's life was stored in the cargo hold now, in frozen fertilized eggs and stored seeds and bacterial cultures, ready to go to work.

Doc looked out over his new home, the faint seabreeze stinging his eyes. He had known Ridgeback would be barren, but he had not expected the *feel* of a barren world to move him.

The sky was bright blue, clouds shrouding Tau Ceti, a sun wider and softer than the sun of Earth. The ocean was a deeper blue, flat and calm. There was no dirt. There was dust and sand and rock, but nothing a farming man would call dirt. There were

no birds, no insects. The only sound was that of sand and small dust-devils dancing in the wind, a low moan almost below the threshold of human hearing.

Doc remembered his college geology class' fieldtrip to the Moon. Ridgeback wasn't dead as Luna was dead. It was more like his uncle's face, after the embalmers got through with him. It looked alive, but it wasn't.

Jase, the eldest of them and the colony leader, raised his hand and waited. When all eyes were on him he crinkled his eyes happily, saving his biggest smile for his sister Cynnie, who was training a holotape camera on him. "We're here, people," his voice boomed in the dead world's silence. "It's good, and it's ours. Let's make the most of it."

There was a ragged cheer and the colonists surged toward the cargo door of the landing craft. The lander was a flattish dome now, its heat shield burned almost through, its Dumbo-style atomic motor buried in dust. It had served its purpose and would never move again. The great door dropped and became a ramp. Crates and machinery began to emerge on little flatbed robot trucks.

Elise put her arm around her husband's waist and hugged him. She murmured, "It's so empty."

"So far." Doc unrolled a package of birth control pills, and felt her flinch.

"Two years before we can have children."

Did she mean it as a question? "Right," he said. They had talked it through too often, in couples and in groups, in training and aboard ship. "At least until Jill gets the ecology going."

"Uh huh." An impatient noise.

Doc wondered if she believed it. At twenty-four, tall and wiry and with seven years of intensive training behind him, he felt competent to handle most emergencies. But children, and babies in particular, were a problem he could postpone.

He had interned for a year at Detroit Memorial, but most of his schooling related directly to General Colonization. His medical experience was no better than Elise's, his knowledge not far superior to that of a 20th century GP. Like his shipmates, Doc was primarily a trained crewman and colonist. His courses in world settling—"funny chemistry," water purification, basic mine engineering, exotic factor recognition, etc.—were largely guesswork. There were no interstellar colonies, not yet.

And bearing children would be an act of faith, a taking possession of the land. Some had fought the delay bitterly. The starship would have been smelling of babies shortly after takeoff if they'd had their way.

He offered Elise a pill. "Bacteria and earthworms come first. Men last," he said. "We're too high on the chain. We can't overload the ecology—"

"Uh huh."

"—before we've even got one. And look—"

She took a six-month birth control pill and swallowed it.

So Doc didn't say: suppose it doesn't work out? Suppose we have to go home? He passed out the pills and watched the women take them, crossing names off a list in his head.

The little robot trucks were all over the place now. Their flat beds were endless belts, and they followed a limited repertoire of voiced orders. They had the lander half unloaded already. When Doc had finished his pill pushing he went to work beside Elise, unloading crates. His thirty patients, including himself, were sickeningly healthy. As an unemployed doctor he'd have to do honest work until someone got ill.

He was wrong, of course. Doc had plenty of employment. His patients were doing manual labor in 1.07 gravities. They'd gained an average of ten pounds the moment the landing craft touched down. It threw their coordination and balance off, causing them to strain muscles and gash themselves.

One of the robot trucks ran over Chris' foot. Chris didn't wince or curse as Doc manipulated the bones, but his teeth ground silently together.

"All done here, Chris." Doc smiled. The meteorologist looked at him bleakly from behind wire-rimmed glasses, eyes blinking without emotion. "Hey, you're a better man than I am. If I had a wound like that, I'd scream my head off—"

Something only vaguely like a smile crossed Chris' lips. "Thanks, Doc," he said, and limped out.

Remarkable control, Doc mused. But then again, that's Chris.

A week after landing, Ridgeback's nineteen-hour day caught up with them. Disrupted body rhythms are no joke; adding poor sleep to the weight adjustment led to chronic fatigue. Doc recognized the signs quickly.

"I'm surprised that it took this long," he said to Elise as she tossed, sleepless.

"Why couldn't we have done our adjusting on ship?" she mumbled, opening a bleary eye.

"There's more to it than just periods of light and darkness. Every planet has its own peculiarities. You just have to get used to them before your sleep cycles adjust."

"Well what am I supposed to do? Jesus, hand me the sleeping pills, wouldja please? I just want to sleep."

"Nope. Don't want anyone hooked on sleeping pills. We've got the 'russian sleep' sets. You'll have one tomorrow." The "russian sleep" headsets were much preferred over chemical sedatives. They produced unconsciousness with a tiny trickle of current through the brain.

"Good," Elise yawned. "Sunset and dawn, they both seem to come too soon."

The colony went up fast. It was all prefabs, makeshift and temporary, the streets cluttered with the tools, machinery and electric cables which nobody had put away because there was no place for them. Gradually places were made. Hydroponic tanks were assembled and stocked, and presently the colonists were back on fresh food.

Much more gradually, the stone houses began to appear.

They blasted their own rock from nearby cliffs with guncotton from the prefab chemical factory. They hauled the fractured stone on the robot trucks, and made concrete to stick it together. There was technology to spare, and endless power from the atomic motor in the landing craft. They took their time with the houses. Prefabs would weather the frequent warm rains for long enough. The stone houses were intended to last much longer. The colonists built thick walls, and left large spaces so that the houses could be expanded when later generations saw fit.

Doc squinted into the mirror, brushing his teeth with his usual precise vertical movements. He jumped when he felt a splash of hot water hit his back. "Cut that out, Elise," he laughed.

She settled back in her bathtub, wrinkling her nose at him. Three years of meagre showers on the ship had left her dying for a real bathtub, where she could waste gallons of water without guilt.

"Spoilsport," she teased. "If you were any kind of fun, you'd come over here and . . ."

"And what?" he asked, interested.

"And rub my back."

"And that's supposed to be fun?"

"I was thinking that we could rub it with you." She grinned, seeing Doc's eyes light up. "And then maybe we could rub you with me . . ."

Later, they toweled each other off, still tingling. "Look!" Doc said, pulling her in front of the mirror. He studied her, marveling. Had Elise become prettier, or was he seeing her with new eyes? He knew she laughed louder and more often than when they had met years ago in school, she the child of a wealthy family and he a scholarship student who dreamt of the stars. He knew that her body was more firm and alive than it had been in her teens. The same sun that had burnt her body nut-brown had lightened her reddish hair to strawberry blond. She grinned at him from the mirror and asked, "Do you propose to take all the credit?"

He nodded happily. He'd always been fit, but his muscles had been stringy, the kind that didn't show. Now they bulged, handsome curves filling out chest and shoulders, legs strong from lifting and moving rock. His skin had darkened under the probing of a warm, friendly sun. He was sleeping well, and so was she.

All of the colonists were darker, more muscular, with thicker calluses on hands and feet. Under open sky or high ceilings they walked straighter than the men and women of Earth's cities. They talked more boldly and seemed to fill more space. In the cities of Earth, the ultimate luxury had been building space. It was beyond the means of all but the wealthiest. Here, there was land for the taking, and twelve-foot ceilings could be built. The house Doc was building for Elise—almost finished now—would be as fine as any her father could have built for her. One that would be passed on to their children, and then to their grandchildren . . .

She seemed to echo his thought. "One last step. I want a bulge, right here," and she patted her flat abdomen. "Your department."

"And Jill's. We're up to mammals already, and we're adjusting. I've got half the 'russian sleep' sets back in the infirmary already."

The Orion spacecraft was a big, obtrusive object, mace-shaped, cruising constantly across the sky. What had been a fifth of a mile

of deuterium snowball, the fuel supply for the starship's battery of laser-fusion motors, was now a thin, shiny skin, still inflated by the residue of deuterium gas. It was the head of the mace. The life support system, ending in motors and shock absorbers, formed the handle.

Roy had taken the ground-to-orbit craft up and was aboard the Orion now, monitoring the relay as Cynnie beamed her holotape up. It was lonely. Once there had been too little room; now there was too much. The ship still smelled of too many people crowded too close for too long. Roy adjusted the viewscreen and grinned back at Cynnie's toothy smile.

"This is Year Day on Ridgeback," she said in her smooth announcer's voice. "It was a barren world when we came. Now, slowly, life is spreading across the land. The farming teams have spent this last year dredging mulch from the sea bed and boiling it to kill the native life. Now it grows the tame bacteria that will make our soil." The screen showed a sequence of action scenes: tractors plowing furrows in the harsh dirt; colonists glistening with sweat as they pulled boulders from the ground; and Jill supervising the spreading of the starter soil. Grass seed and earthworms were sown into the trenches, and men and machines worked together to fold them into the earth.

Cynnie had mounted a camera on one of the small flyers for an aerial view. "The soil is being spread along a ten-mile strip," she said, "and grains are being planted. Later we'll have fruit trees and shade trees, bamboo and animal feed."

It was good, Roy thought, watching. It was smooth. Getting it all had been rough enough. Before they were finished the colonists had become damn sick of Roy and Cynnie poking their cameras into their every activity. That sign above the auditorium toilet: Smile! Roy Is Watching!

He'd tried to tell them. "Don't you know who it is that builds starships? It's taxpayers, that's who! And they've got to get something for their money. Sure we're putting on a show for them. If we don't, when election time comes around they may ask for a refund."

Oh, they probably believed him. But the sign was still up.

Roy watched Cynnie interview Jase and Brew in the fields; watched Angie and Chris constructing the animal pens. Jill thawed some of the fertilized goat eggs and a tape was shown of the wriggling embryos.

"At first," Cynnie reminisced, "Ridgeback was daunting. There was no sound: no crickets, no birdsongs, but no roar of traffic either. By day, the sky is Earthlike enough, but by night the constellations are brighter. It's impossible to forget how far from home we are—we can't even see Sol, invisible somewhere in the northern hemisphere. It's hard to forget that no help of any kind could come in much less than twenty-five years. It would take five years just to refuel the ship. It takes fourteen years to make the trip, although thanks to relativity it was only three years 'ship time.'

"Yes, we are alone." The image of Cynnie's sober face segued to the town hall, a geodesic dome of metal tubing sprayed with plastic. "But it is heartening that we have found, in each other, the makings of a community. We come together for midday meal, discussions, songfests and group worship services."

Cynnie's face was calm now, comforting. "We have no crime, and no unemployment. We're much too busy for marital squabbles or political fighting." She grinned, and the sparkle of her personality brought pleasure to Roy's analytical mind. "In fact, I have work to do myself. So, until next year, this is Cynnie Mitchell on Ridgeback, signing off."

A year and a half after landing, a number of animals were out of incubation with a loss of less than two percent. The mammals drank synthetic milk now, but soon they would be milling in their pens, eating Ridgeback grass and adding their own rich wastes to the cooking compost heaps.

Friday night was community night at the town hall.

From the inside the ribs of the dome were still visible through the sprayed plastic walls, and some of the decorations were less than stylish, but it was a warm place, a friendly, relaxing place where the common bond between the Ridgebackers was strengthened.

Jill, especially, seemed to love the stage, and took every opportunity to mount it, almost vibrating with her infectious energy.

"Everything's right on schedule," she said happily. "The fruit flies are breeding like mad." (Booo!) "And if I hear that again I'm gonna break out the mosquitos. Gang, there are things we can live without, but we don't know what they are yet. Chances are we'll be raising the sharks sooner or later. We've been lucky so far. Really lucky." She cleared her throat dramatically. "And

speaking of luck, we have Chris with some good news for the farmers, and bad news for the sunbathers. Chris?"

There was scattered applause, most vigorously from Chris' tiny wife Angie. He walked to the lectern and adjusted the microphone before speaking.

"We, uh," he took off his glasses, polishing them on his shirt, then replaced them, smiling nervously. "We've been having good weather, people, but there's a storm front moving over the mountains. I think Greg can postpone the irrigation canals for a week, we're going to get plenty wet."

He coughed, and moved the microphone close to his mouth. "June and I are working to program the atmospheric model into the computer. Until we do, weather changes will keep catching us unaware. We have to break down a fairly complex set of thermo and barometric dynamics into something that can be dealt with systematically—wind speed, humidity, vertical motion, friction, pressure gradients, and a lot of other factors still have to be fed in, but we're making progress. Maybe next year we'll be able to tell you how to dress for the tenth anniversary of Landing Day."

There were derisive snorts and laughter, and Chris was applauded back into his seat.

Jase bounded onto the stage and grabbed the mike. "Any more announcements? No? All right, then, we all voted on tonight's movie, so no groans, please. Lights?"

The auditorium dimmed. He slipped from the stage and the twin beams of the holo projector flickered onto the screen.

It was a war movie, shot in flatfilm but optically reconstructed to simulate depth. Doc found it boring. He slipped out during a barrage of cannon fire. He headed to the lab and found Jill there already, using one of the small microscopes.

"Hi hon," he called out, flipping on his desk light. "Working late?"

"Well, I'm maybe just a wee bit more bugged than I let on. Just a little."

"About what?"

"I keep thinking that one day we'll find out that we left something out of our tame ecology. It's just a feeling, but it won't go away."

"Like going on vacation," Doc said, deliberately flippant. "You know you forgot something. You'd just rather it was your toothbrush and not your passport."

She smeared a cover glass over a drop of fluid on a slide and set it to dry. "Yes, it feels like that."

"Do you really have mosquitos in storage?"

She twinkled and nodded. "Yep. Hornets too."

"Just how good is it going? You know how impatient everyone is."

"No real problems. There sure as hell might have been, but thanks to my superior planning—" she stuck out her tongue at Doc's grimace. "We'll have food for ourselves and all the children we can raise. I've been getting a little impatient myself, you know? As if there's a part of me that isn't functioning at full efficiency."

Doc laughed. "Then I think you'd better tell Greg."

"I'll do better. I'll announce it tonight and let all the fathers-to-be catch the tidings in one shot."

"Oh boy."

"What?"

"No, it has to be done that way. I know it. I'm just thinking about nine months from now. Oh boy."

So it was announced that evening. As Doc might have expected, someone had already cheated. Somehow Nat, the midwestern earthmother blond, had taken a contraceptive pill and, even with Doc watching, had avoided swallowing it. Doc was fairly sure that her husband Brew knew nothing of it, although she was already more than four months along when she confessed.

Nat had jumped the gun, and there wasn't a woman on Ridgeback who didn't envy her. A year and eleven months after Landing Day, Doc delivered Ridgeback's first baby.

Sleepy, exhausted by her hours of labor, Nat looked at her baby with a pride that was only half maternal. Her face was flushed, yellow hair tangled in mats with perspiration and fatigue. She held her baby, swaddled in blankets, at her side. "I can hear them outside. What do they want?" she asked drowsily, fighting to keep her eyelids open.

Doc breathed deeply. Ridiculous, but the scentless air of Ridgeback seemed a little sweeter. "They're waiting for a glimpse of the little crown princess."

"Well, she's staying here. Tell them she's beautiful," Ridgeback's first mother whispered, and dropped off to sleep.

Doc washed his hands and dried them on a towel. He stood

above the slumbering pair, considering. Then he gently pried the baby from her mother's grip and took her in his arms. Half-conscious mother's wish or no, the infant must be shown to the colony before they could rest. Especially Brew. He could see the Swede's great broad hands knotting into nervous fists as he waited outside. And the rest of them in a half-crescent around the door; and the inevitable Cynnie and Roy with their holotape cameras.

"It's a girl," he told them. "Nat's resting comfortably." The baby was red as a tomato and looked as fragile as Venetian glass. She and Doc posed for the camera, then Doc left her with Brew to make a short speech.

Elise and Greg, Jill's husband, had both had paramedic training. Doc set up a rotating eight-hour schedule for the three of them, starting with Elise. The group outside was breaking up as he left, but he managed to catch Jase.

"I'd like to be taken off work duties for a while," he told the colony leader, when the two were alone.

Jase gripped his arm. "Something's wrong with the baby?" There was a volume of concern in the question.

"I doubt it, but she is the first, and I want to watch her and Nat. Most of the women are pregnant now. I want to keep an eye on them, too."

"You're not worried about anything specific?"

"No."

When Elise left her shift at the maternity ward, she found him staring at the stone ceiling. She asked, "Insomnia again? Shall I get a 'russian sleep' set?"

"No."

She studied his face. "The baby?"

She'd seen it too, then. "You just left the baby. She's fine, isn't she?"

"They're both fine. Sleeping. Harry?" She was the only one who called him that. "What is it?"

"No, nothing's bothering me. You know everything *I* know. It's just that . . ."

"Well?"

"It's just that I want to do everything right. This is so important. So I keep checking back on myself, because there's no one I can call in to check my work. Can you understand what I'm getting at?"

She pursed her lips. Then said, "I know that the only baby in

the world could get a lot more attention than she needs. There shouldn't be too many people around her, and they should all be smiling. That's important to a baby."

Doc watched as she took off her clothes and got into bed. The slight swell of her pregnancy was just beginning to show. Within six months there would be nine more children on Ridgeback, and one would be theirs.

Predictably, Brew's and Nat's daughter became Eve.

It seemed nobody but Doc had noticed anything odd about Eve. Even laymen know better than to expect a newborn child to be pretty. A baby doesn't begin to look like a baby until it is weeks old. The cherubs of the Renaissance paintings of Foucquet or Conegliano were taken from two-year-olds. Naturally Eve looked odd, and most of the colony, who had never seen newborn children, took it in their stride. . . .

But Doc worried.

The ship's library was a world's library. It was more comprehensive, and held more microfilm and holographically encoded information than any single library on Earth. Doc spent weeks running through medical tapes, and got no satisfaction thereby.

Eve wasn't sick. She was a "good baby"; she gave no more trouble than usual, and no less. Nat had no difficulty nursing her, which was good, as there were no adult cows available on Ridgeback.

Doc pulled a microfisch chip out of the viewer and yawned irritably. The last few weeks had cost him his adjustment to Ridgeback time, and gained him . . . well, a kind of general education in pediatrics. There was nothing specific to look for, no *handle* on the problem.

Bluntly put, Eve was an ugly baby.

There was nothing more to say, and nothing to do but wait.

Roy and Cynnie showed their tapes for the year. Cynnie had a good eye for detail. Until he watched the camera view trucking from the landing craft past the line of houses on Main Street, to Brew, to a closeup of Brew's house, Doc had never noticed how Brew's house reflected Brew himself. It was designed like the others: tall and squarish, with a sloped roof and small window. But the stones in Brew's house were twice the size of those in Doc's house. Brew was proud of his strength.

Roy was in orbit on Year Day, but Cynnie stayed to cover the festivities, such as they were. Earth's hypothetical eager audience still hadn't seen Year Day One. Jase spoke for the camera, comparing the celebration with the first Thanksgiving Day in New England. He was right: it was a feast, a display of the variety of foods Ridgeback was now producing, and not much more than that.

His wife June sang a nondenominational hymn, and they all followed along, each in his own key. Nat fed Eve a bit of corncake and fruit juice, and the colonists applauded Eve's gurgling smile.

The folks back on Earth might not have thought it very exciting, but to the Ridgebackers it meant everything. This was food they had grown themselves. All of them had bruises or blisters or calluses from weeding or harvesting. They were more than a community now, they were a world, and the fresh fruit and vegetables, and the hot breads, tasted better than anything they could have imagined.

Six months after the birth of Eve, Doc was sure. There was a problem.

The children of Ridgeback totaled seven. Two of the women had miscarried, fewer than he might have feared, and without complications. Jill was still carrying hers, and Doc was beginning to wonder; but it wasn't serious yet. Jill was big and strong with wide hips and a deep bust. Even now Greg was hard put to keep her from commandeering one of the little flyers and jouncing off to the coastline to check the soil, or inland to supervise the fresh water fish preserve. Give her another week . . .

The night Elise had delivered their child, it had been special. She had had a dry birth, with the water sack rupturing too early, and Doc had had to use a lubrication device. Elise was conscious during the entire delivery, eschewing painkillers for the total experience of her first birth. She delivered safely, for which Doc had given silent thanks. His nerves were scraped to supersensitivity, and he found himself just sitting and holding her hand, whispering affection and encouragement to her, while Greg did much of the work. With Elise's approval he named their son Gerald, shortened to Jerry. Jerry was three weeks old now, healthy and squalling, with a ferocious grip in his tiny hands.

But even a father's pride could not entirely hide the squarish jawline, the eyes, the . . .

All the children had it, all the six recent ones. And Eve hadn't lost it. Doc continued his research in the microlibrary, switching from pediatrics to genetics. He had a miscroscope and an electron microscope, worth their hundreds of thousands of dollars in transportation costs; he had scrapings of his own flesh and Eve's and Jerry's. What he lacked was a Nobel Prize geneticist to stand behind his shoulder and point out what were significant deviations as opposed to his own poor slide preparation techniques.

He caught Brew looking at him at mealtimes, as though trying to raise the nerve to speak. Soon the big man would break through his inhibitions, Doc could see it coming. Or perhaps Nat would broach the question. Her eldest brother had been retarded, and Doc knew she was sensitive about it. How long could it be before that pain rose to the surface?

And what would he say to them then?

It was not a mutation. One could hardly expect the same mutation to hit all of seven couples in the same way.

It was no disease. The children were phenomenally healthy.

So Doc worked late into the night, sometimes wearing a black scowl as he retraced dead ends. He needed advice, and advice was 11.9 light years away. Was he seeing banshees? Nobody else had noticed anything. Naturally not; the children all looked normal, for they all looked alike. Only Brew seemed disturbed. Hell, it was probably Doc that was worrying Brew, just as it was Doc that worried Elise. He ought to spend more time with Elise and Jerry.

Jill lost her baby. It was stillborn, pitiful in its frailty. Jill turned to Greg as the dirt showered down on the cloth that covered her child, biting her lip savagely, trying to stop the tears. She and her husband held each other for a long moment, then, with the rest of the colonists, they walked back to the dwellings.

The colonists had voted early, and unanimously, to give up coffins on Ridgeback. Humans who died here would give their bodies to the conquest of the planet. Doc wondered if a coffin would have made this ceremony easier, more comforting in its tradition. Probably not, he thought. Dead is dead.

Doc went home with Elise. He'd been spending more time

there lately, and less time with the microscopes. Jerry was crawling now, and he crawled everywhere; you had to watch him like a hawk. He could pick his parents unerringly out of a crowd of adults, and he would scamper across the floor, cooing, his eyes alight . . . his deepset brown eyes.

It was a week later that Jase came to him. After eight hours of labor June had finally released her burden. For a newborn infant the baby was big and strong, though in any normal context he was a fragile, precious thing. As father, Jase was entitled to see him first. He looked down at his son and said, "He's just like the others." His eyes and his voice were hollow, and at that moment Doc could no longer see the jovial colony leader who called square dances at the weekly hoedown.

"Of course he is."

"Look, don't con me, Doc. I was eight when Cynnie was born. She didn't look like any of them. And she never looked like Eve."

"Don't you think that's for me to say?"

"Yes. And damned quick!"

Doc rubbed his jaw, considering. If he was honest with himself he had to admit he ached to talk to somebody. "Let's make it tomorrow. In the ship's library."

Jase's strong hand gripped his arm. "Now."

"Tomorrow, Jase. I've got a lot to say, and there are things in the library you ought to see."

"Here," he said, dialing swiftly. A page appeared on the screen, three-quarters illustration, and one-quarter print to explain it. "Notice the head? And the hands. Eve's fingers are longer than that. Her forehead slopes more. But look at these." He conjured up a series of growth states paired with silhouettes of bone structure.

"So?"

"She's maturing much faster than normal."

"Oh."

"At first I didn't think anything about the head. Any infant's head is distorted during passage from the uterus. It goes back to normal if the birth wasn't difficult. And you can't tell much from the features; all babies look pretty much alike. But the hands and arms bothered me."

"And now?"

"See for yourself. Her face is too big and her skull is too small and too flat. And I don't like the jaw, or the thin lips." Doc rubbed his eyes wearily. "And there's the hair. That much hair isn't unheard of at that age, but taken with everything else . . . you can see why I was worried."

"And all the kids look just like her. Even Jase Junior."

"Even Jerry. And Jill's stillbirth."

In the ship's library there was a silence as of mourning.

Jase said, "We'll have to tell Earth. The colony is a failure."

Doc shook his head. "We'd better see how it develops first."

"We can't have normal children, Doc."

"I'm not ready to give up, Jase. And if it's true, we can't go back to Earth, either."

"What? Why?"

"This thing isn't a mutation. Not in us, it can't be. What it could be is a virus replacing some of the genes. A virus is a lot like a free-floating chromosome anyway. If we've got a disease that keeps us from having normal children—"

"That's stupid. A virus here, waiting for us, where there's nothing for it to live on but plankton? You—"

"No, no, no. It had to come with us. Something like the common cold could have mutated aboard ship. There was enough radiation outside the shielding. Someone sneezes in the airlock before he puts his helmet on. A year later someone else inhales the mutant."

Jase thought it through. "We can't take it back to Earth."

"Right. So what's the hurry? It'd be twenty-four years before they could answer a cry for help. Let's take our time and find out what we've really got."

"Doc, in God's name, what can we tell the others?"

"Nothing yet. When the time comes I'll tell them."

Those few months were a busy time for Ridgeback's doctor. Then they were over. The children were growing, and most of the women were pregnant, including Angie and Jill, who had both had miscarriages. Never again would all the women of Ridgeback be having children in one ear-shattering population explosion.

Now there was little work for Doc. He spoke to Jase, who put him on the labor routines. Most of the work was agricultural,

with the heavy jobs handled by machines. Robot trucks, trailing plows, scored rectangular patterns across the land.

The fenced bay was rich in Earth-born plankton, and now there were larger forms to eat the plankton. Occasionally Greg opened the filter to let discolored water spread out into the world, contaminating the ocean.

At night the colonists watched news from Earth, 11.9 years in transit, and up to a year older before Roy boarded the starship to beam it down. They strung the program out over the year in hour segments to make it last longer. There were no wars in progress, to speak of; the Procyon colony project had been abandoned; Macrostructures Inc. was still trying to build an interstellar ramjet. It all seemed very distant.

Jase came whistling into Doc's lab, but backed out swiftly when he saw that he had interrupted a counselling session with Cynnie and Roy. Doc was the closest thing the colony had to a marriage therapist. Jase waited outside until the pair had left, then trotted in.

"Rough day?"

"Yeah. Jase, Roy and Cynnie don't fight, do they?"

"They never did. They're like twins. Married people do get to be like each other, but those two overdo it sometimes."

"I knew it. There's something wrong, but it's not between them." Doc rubbed his eyes on his sleeve. "They were sounding me out, trying to get me talking about the children without admitting they're scared. Anyway . . . what's up?"

Jase brought his hands from behind his back. He held two bamboo poles rigged for fishing. "What say we exercise our manly prerogatives?"

"Ye gods! In our private spawning ground?"

"Why not? It's big enough. There are enough fish. And we can't let the surplus go; they'd starve. It's a big ocean."

By now the cultivated strip of topsoil led tens of miles north and south along the continent. Jill claimed that life would spread faster that way, outward from the edges of the strip. The colony was raising its own chicken eggs and fruit and vegetables. On Landing Day they'd been the first in generations to taste moa meat, whose rich flavor had come *that* close to making the New Zealand bird extinct. Why shouldn't they catch their own fish?

They made a full weekend of it. They hauled a prefab with

them on the flyer and set it up on the barren shore. For three days they fished with the springy bamboo poles. The fish were eager and trusting. They ate some of their catch, and stored the rest for later.

On the last day Jase said, "I kept waiting to see you lose some of that uptight look. You finally have, a little, I think."

"Yeah. I'm glad this happened, Jase."

"Okay. What about the children?"

He didn't need to elaborate. Doc said, "They'll never be normal."

"Then what are they?"

"I dunno. How do you tell people who came twelve light years to build a world that their heirs will be . . ." He groped for words. "Whatever. Changed. Animals."

"Christ. What a mess."

"Give me time to tell Elise . . . if she hasn't guessed by now. Maybe she has."

"How long?"

"A week, maybe. Give us time to be off with Jerry. Might make it easier if we're with him."

"Or harder."

"Yeah, there's that." He cast his line out again. "Anyway, she'll keep the secret, and she'd never forgive me if I didn't tell her first. And you'd better tell June the night before I make the big announcement." The words seemed to catch in his throat and he hung his head, miserable.

Tentatively Jase said, "It's absolutely nobody's fault."

"Oh, sure. I was just thinking about the last really big announcement I helped make. Years ago. Seems funny now, doesn't it? 'It's safe, people. You can start dreaming now. Go ahead and have those babies, folks. It's all right . . .'" His voice trailed off and he looked to Jase in guilty confusion. "What could I do, Jase? It's like thalidomide. In the beginning, it all looked so wonderful."

Jase was silent, listening to the sound of water lapping against the boat. "I just hate to tell Earth, that's all," he finally said in a low voice. "It'll be like giving up. Even if we solve this thing they'd never risk sending another ship."

"But we've got to warn them."

"Doc, what's *happening* to us?"

"I don't know."

"How hard have you—no, never mind." Jase pulled his line in, baited it and sent it whipping out again. Long silences are in order when men talk and fish.

"Jase, I'd give anything I have to know the answer. Some of the genes look different in the electron microscope. Maybe. Hell, it's all really too fuzzy to tell, and I don't really know what it means anyway. None of my training anticipated anything like *this. You* try to think of something."

"Alien invasion."

Pause. "Oh, really?"

Jase's line jumped. He wrestled in a deep sea bass and freed the hook. He said, "It's the safest, most painless kind of invasion. They find a world they want, but there's an intelligent species in control. So they design a virus that will keep us from bearing intelligent children. After we're gone they move in at their leisure. If they like they can use a countervirus, so the children can bear human beings again for slaves."

The bamboo pole seemed dead in Doc's hands. He said, "That's uglier than anything I've thought of."

"Well?"

"Could be. Insufficient data. If it's true, it's all the more reason to warn Earth. But Ridgeback is doomed."

Jerry had his mother's hair, sun-bleached auburn. He had too much of it. On his narrow forehead it merged with his brows . . . his shelf of brow, and the brown eyes watching from way back. He hardly needed the shorts he was wearing; the hair would have been almost enough. He was nearly three.

He seemed to sense something wrong between his parents. He would spend some minutes scampering through the grove of sapling fruit trees, agile as a child twice his age; then suddenly returned to take their hands and try to tug them both into action.

Doc thought of the frozen fertilized eggs of dogs in storage. Jerry with a dog . . . the thought was repulsive. Why? Shouldn't a child have a dog?

"Well, of course I guessed *something,*" Elise said bitterly. "You were always in the library. When you were home, the way that you looked at Jerry . . . and me, come to think of it. I see now why you haven't taken me to bed much lately." She'd been avoid-

ing his eyes, but now she looked full at him. "I *do* see. But, Harry, couldn't you have asked me for help? I have some medical knowledge, and, and I'm your wife, and Jerry's mother, damn it Harry!"

"Would you believe I didn't want you worrying?"

"Oh, really? How did it work?"

Her sarcasm cut deep. Bleeding, he said, "Nothing worked."

Jerry came out of the trees at a tottering run. Doc stood up, caught him, swung him around, chased him through the trees . . . came back puffing, smiling, holding his hand. He almost lost the smile, but Elise was smiling back, with some effort. She hugged Jerry, then pulled fried chicken from the picnic basket and offered it around.

She said, "That alien invasion idea is stupid."

"Granted. It'd be easy to think someone has 'done' it to us."

"Haven't you found anything? Isn't there anything I can help with?"

"I've found a lot. All the kids have a lower body temperature, two point seven degrees. They're healthy as horses, but hell, who would they catch measels from? Their brain capacity is too small, and not much of it is frontal lobe. They're hard to toilet train and they should have started babbling, at least, long ago. What counts is the brain, of course."

Elise took one of Jerry's small hands. Jerry crawled into her lap and she rocked him. "His hands are okay. Human. His eyes . . . are brown, like yours. His cheekbones are like yours, too. High and a little rounded."

Doc tried to smile. "His eyes look a little strange. They're not really slanted enough to suspect mongolism, but I'll bet there's a gene change. But where do I go from there? I can see differences, and they're even consistent, but there's no precedent for the analysis equipment to extrapolate from." Doc looked disgusted. Elise touched his cheek, understanding.

"Can you teach me to use an electron miscroscope?"

Doc sat at the computer console, watching over Jill's shoulder as she brought out the Orion vehicle's image of Ridgeback. The interstellar spacecraft doubled as a weather eye, and the picture, once drab with browns and grays, now showed strips of green beneath the fragmented cloud cover. If Ridgeback was dead, it certainly didn't show on the screen.

"Well, we've done a fair old job." Jill grinned and took off her headset. Her puffy natural had collected dust and seeds and vegetable fluff until she gave up and shaved it off. The tightly curled mat just covered her scalp now, framing her chocolate cameo features. "The cultivated strip has spread like weeds. All along the continent now I get CO_2-oxygen exchange. It jumped the ridges last year, and now I get readings on the western side."

"Are you happy?"

"No," she said slowly. "I've done my job. Is it too much to want a child too? I wouldn't care about the . . . problem. I just want . . ."

"It's nobody's fault," Doc said helplessly.

"I know, I know. But two miscarriages. Couldn't they have known back on Earth? Wasn't there any way to be sure? Why did I have come all this way . . ." She caught herself and smiled thinly. "I guess I should count my blessings. I'm better off than poor Angie."

"Poor Angie," Doc echoed sadly. How could they have known about Chris? The night Doc announced his conclusions about the children, there had been tears and harsh words, but no violence. But then there was Chris.

Chris, who had wanted a child more than any of them could have known. Who had suffered silently through Angie's first miscarriage, who hoped and prayed for the safe delivery of their second effort.

It had been an easy birth.

And the morning after Doc's speech, the three of them, Chris, Angie and the baby, were found in the quiet of their stone house, the life still ebbing from Chris' eyes and the gaps in his wrists.

"I'm sorry," he said over and over, shaking his head as if he were cold, his watery brown eyes dulling. "I just couldn't take it. I just . . . I just . . ." and he died. The three of them were buried in the cemetery outside of town, without coffins.

The town was different after the deaths, a stifling quiet hanging in the streets. Few colonists ate at the communal meals, choosing to take their suppers at home.

In an effort to bring everyone together, Jase encouraged them to come to town hall for Movie Night.

The film was "The Sound Of Music." The screen erupted with sound and color, dazzling green Alps and snow-crested moun-

tains, happy song and the smiling faces of normal, healthy children.

Half the colonists walked out.

Most of the women took contraceptives now, except those who chose not to tamper with their estrogen balance. For these, Doc performed painless menstrual extractions bimonthly.

Nat and Elise insisted on having more children. Maybe the problem only affected the firstborn, they argued. Doc fought the idea at first. He found himself combatting Brew's sullen withdrawal, Nat's frantic insistence, and a core of hot anger in his own wife.

Earth could find a cure. It was possible. Then their grandchildren would be normal again, the heirs to a world.

He gave in.

But the children were the same. In the end, Nat alone had not given up. She had borne five children, and was carrying her sixth.

The message of failure was halfway to Earth, but any reply was still nineteen years away. Doc had adopted the habit of talking things over with Jase, hoping that he would catch some glimpse of a solution.

"I still think it's a disease," he told Jase, who had heard that before, but didn't mention it. The bay was quiet and their lines were still. They talked only during fishing trips. They didn't want the rest of the colony brooding any more than they already were. "A mutant virus. But I've been wondering, could the changes have screwed us up? A shorter day, a longer year, a little heavier gravity. Different air mixture. No common cold, no mosquito bites; even that could be the key."

On a night like this, in air this clear, you could even see starglades casting streaks across the water. A fish jumped far across the bay, and phosphorescence lit that patch of water for a moment. The Orion vehicle, mace-shaped, rose out of the west, past the blaze of the Pleiades. Roy would be rendezvousing with it now, preparing for tomorrow's Year Day celebration.

Jase seemed to need these trips even more than Doc. After the murders the life seemed to have gone out of him, only flashes of his personality coming through at tranquil times like these. He asked, "Are you going to have Jill breed mosquitos?"

". . . Yes."

"I think you're reaching. Weren't you looking at the genes in the cytoplasm?"

"Yeah. Elise's idea, and it was a good one. I'd forgotten there were genes outside the cell nucleus. They control the big things, you know: not the shape of your fingers, but how many you get, and where. But they're hard to find, Jase. And maybe we found some differences between our genes and the children's, but even the computer doesn't know what the difference *means*."

"Mosquitos." Jase shook his head. "We know there's a fish down that way. Shall we go after him?"

"We've got enough. Have to be home by morning. Year Day."

"What exactly are we celebrating *this* time?"

"Hell, you're the mayor. You think of something." Doc sulked, watching the water ripple around his float. "Jase, we can't give up—"

Jase's face was slack with horror, eyes cast up to the sky. Doc followed his gaze, to where a flaring light blossomed behind the Orion spacecraft.

"Oh my God," Jase rasped, "Roy's up there."

Throwing his bamboo pole in the water, Jase started the engine and raced for shore.

Doc studied the readouts carefully. "Mother of God," he whispered. "How many engines did he fire?"

"Six." Jill's eyes were glued to the screen, her voice flat. "If he was aboard, he . . . well, there isn't much chance he survived the acceleration. Most of the equipment up there must be junk now."

"But what if he *did* survive? Is there a chance?"

"I don't know. Roy was getting set to beam the messages down, but said that he had an alarm to handle first. He went away for a while, and . . ." She seemed to search for words. She whispered, "Boom."

"If he was outside the ship, in one of the little rocket sleds, he could get to the shuttle vehicle."

Jase walked heavily into the lab.

"What about Cynnie? What did she say?" Doc asked quickly.

Jase's face was blank of emotion. "She talked to him before the . . . accident."

"And?"

"It's all she would say. I'm afraid she took it pretty bad. This

was sort of the final straw." His eyes were hollow as he reminisced. "She was always a brave kid, you know? Anything I could do, she'd be right behind me, measuring up to big brother. There's just a limit, that's all. There's just a limit."

Doc's voice was firm, only a slight edge of unease breaking through his control. "I think we had better face it. Roy is dead. The Orion's ruined, and the shuttle-craft is gone anyway."

"He could be alive . . ." Jill ventured.

Doc tried to take the sting out of his voice, and was not entirely successful. "Where? On the ship, crushed to a paste? Not on the shuttle. It's tumbling further from the Orion every second. There's no one on it. In one of the rocket sleds?" His face softened, and they could see that he was afraid to have hope. "Yes. Maybe that. Maybe on one of the sleds."

They nodded to each other, and they and the other colonists spent long hours on the telescope hoping, and praying.

But there was nothing alive up there now. Ridgeback was entirely alone.

Cynnie never recovered. She would talk only to her brother, refusing even to see her child. She was morose and ate little, spending most of her time watching the sky with something like terrified awe in her eyes.

And one day, seven months after the accident, she walked into the woods and never returned.

Doc hadn't seen Jerry for three weeks.

The children lived in a community complex which had some of the aspects of a boarding school. The colonists took turns at nursing duty. Jill spent most of her time there since she and Greg were on the outs. Lately, Elise had taken up the habit too. Not that he blamed her; he couldn't have been very good company the last few months.

Parents took their children out to the T-shaped complex whenever they felt like it, so that some of the children had more freedom than others. But by and large they all were expected to live there eventually.

Brew was coming out of the woods with a group of six children when Doc stumbled into the sunlight and saw Jerry.

He wore a rough pair of coveralls that fit him well enough, but he would have looked ludicrous if there had been anything to

laugh about. Soft brown fur covered every inch of him. As Doc appeared he turned his head with a bird-quick movement, saw his father, and scampered over. Jerry bounced into him, wrapped long arms tight about his rib cage and said, eagerly, "Daddy."

There was a slight pause.

"Hello, Jerry." Doc slowly bent to the ground, looking into his son's eyes.

"Daddy Doc, Daddy Doc," he chattered, smiling up at his father. His vocabulary was about fifteen words. Jerry was six years old and much too big for his age. His fingers were very long and strong, but his thumbs were small and short and inconsequential. Doc had seen him handle silverware without much trouble. His nose pugged, jaw massive with a receding chin. There were white markings in the fur around his eyes, accentuating the heavy supraorbital ridges, making the poor child look like—

The poor child. Doc snorted with self-contempt. *Listen to me. Why not my child?*

Because I'm ashamed. Because we lock our children away to ease the pain. Because they look like—

Doc gently disengaged Jerry's fingers from his shirt, turned and half-ran back to the ship. Shivering, he curled up on one of the cots and cursed himself to sleep.

Hours later he roused himself and, woozy with fatigue, he went looking for Jase. He found him on a work detail in the north fields, picking fruit.

"I'm not sure," he told Jase. "They're not old enough for me to be sure. But I want your opinion."

"Show me," said Jase, and followed him to the library.

The picture on the tape was an artist's rendering of Pithicanthropus erectus. He stood on a grassy knoll looking warily out at the viewer, his long-fingered hand clutching a sharp-edged throwing rock.

"I'll smack your head," said Jase.

"I'm wrong, then?"

"You're calling them apes!"

"I'm not. Read the copy. Pithicanthropus was a small-brained Pleistocene primate, thought to be a transitional stage between ape and man. You got that? Pith is also called Java Man."

Jase glared at the reader. "The markings are different. And there is the fur—"

"Forget 'em. They're nothing but guesswork. All the artist had to go on were crumbling bones and some broken rocks."

"Broken rocks?"

"Pith used to break rocks in half to get an edged weapon. It was about the extent of his tool-making ability. All we know about what he looked like comes from fossilized bones—very much like the skeleton of a stoop shouldered man with foot trouble, topped with the skull of an ape with hydrocephalus."

"Very nice. Will Eve's children be fish?"

"I don't know, dammit. I don't know anything at all. Look, Pith isn't the only candidate for missing link. Homo Habilis looked a lot more like us and lived about two million years ago. Kenyapithicus Africanus resembled us less, but lived eighteen million years earlier. So I can't say what we've got here. God only knows what the next generation will be like. That depends on whether the children are moving backwards or maybe sideways. I don't know, Jase. I just don't *know!*" The last words were shrill, and Doc punctuated them by slamming his fist against a wire window screen. Then, because he could think of nothing more to say, he did it again. And again. And—

Jase caught his arm. Three knuckles were torn and bleeding. "Get some sleep," he said, eyes sad. "I'll have them send Earth a description of Eve the way she is now. She's oldest, and best developed. We'll send them all we have on her. It's all we can do."

Momentum and the thoroughness of their training had kept them going for eight years. Now the work of making a world slowed and stopped.

It didn't matter. The crops and the meat animals had no natural enemies on Ridgeback. Life spread along the continent like a green plague. Already it had touched some of the islands.

Doc was gathering fruit in the groves. It was a shady place, cool, quiet, and it made for a tranquil day's work. There was no set quota. You took home approximately a third of what you gathered. Sometimes he worked there, and sometimes he helped with the cattle, examining for health and pregnancy, or herding the animals with the nonlethal sonic stunners.

He wished that Elise were here with him, so they could laugh together, but that was growing infrequent now. She was growing

more involved with the nursery, and he spent little of his time there.

Jill's voice hailed him from the bottom of the ladder. "Hey up there, Doc. How about a break?"

He grinned and climbed down, hauling a sack of oranges.

"Tired of spending the day reading, I guess," she said lightly. She offered him an apple. He polished it on his shirt and took a bite. "Just needed to talk to somebody."

"Kinda depressed?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guess it's just getting hard to cope with some of the problems."

"I guess there have been a few."

Jill gave a derisive chuckle. "I sure don't know Greg anymore. Ever since he set up the brewery and the distillery, he doesn't really want to see me at all."

"Don't take it so hard," Doc comforted. "The strain is showing on all of us. Half the town does little more than read or play tapes or drink. Personally, I'd like to know who smuggled the hemp seeds on board."

Jill laughed, which he was glad for, then her face grew serious again. "You know, there'd probably be more trouble if we didn't need someone to look after the kids." She paused, looking up at Doc. "I spend a lot of my time there," she said unnecessarily.

"Why?" It was the first time he'd asked. They had left the groves and were heading back into town along the gravel road that Greg and Brew and the others had built in better days.

"We . . . I came here for a reason. To continue the human race, to cross a new frontier, one that my children could have a part in. Now, now that we know that the colony is doomed, there's just no motive to anything. No reason. I'm surprised that there isn't more drinking, more carousing and four-somes and divorces and everything else. Nothing seems to matter a whole lot. Nothing at all."

Doc took her by the shoulders and held her. Go on and cry, he silently said to her. God, I'm tired.

The children grew fast. At nine Eve reached puberty and seemed to shoot skyward. She grew more hair. She learned more words, but not many more. She spent much of her time in the trees in the children's complex. The other girls grew almost as fast as she did, and the boys.

Every Saturday Brew and Nat took some of the children walking. Sometimes they climbed the foothills at the base of the continental range; sometimes they wandered through the woods, spending most of their efforts keeping the kids from disappearing into the trees.

One Saturday they returned early, their faces frozen in anger. Eve and Jerry were missing. At first they refused to discuss it, but when Jase began organizing a search party, they talked.

They'd been ready to turn for home when Eve suddenly scampered into the trees. Jerry gave a whoop and followed her. Nat had left the others with Brew while she followed after the refugees.

It proved easy to find them, and easier still to determine what they were doing with each other when she came upon them.

Eve looked up at Nat, innocent eyes glazed with pleasure. Nat trembled for a moment, horrified, then drove them both away with a stick, screaming filth at them.

Over Nat's vehement objections and Brew's stoney refusal to join, Jase got his search party together and set off. They met the children coming home. By that time Nat had talked to the other mothers and fathers at the children's complex.

Jase called a meeting. There was no way to avoid it now, feelings were running too deep.

"We may as well decide now," he told them that night. "There's no question of the children marrying. We could train them to mouth the words of any of our religions, but we couldn't expect them to understand what they were saying. So the question is, shall we let the children reproduce?"

He faced an embarrassed silence.

"There's no question of their being too young. In biological terms they aren't, or you could all go home. In our terms, they'll never be old enough. Anyone have anything to say?"

"Let's have Doc's opinion," a hoarse voice called. There was a trickle of supportive applause.

Doc rose, feeling very heavy. "Fellow colonists . . ." The smile he was trying on for size didn't fit his face. He let it drop. There was a desperate compassion in his voice. "This world will never be habitable to mankind until we find out what went wrong here. I say let our children breed. Someday someone on Earth may find out how to cure what we've caught. Maybe he'll know how to let

our descendants breed men again. Maybe this problem will only last a generation or two, then we'll get human babies again. If not, well, what have we lost? Who else is there to inherit Ridgeback?"

"No!" The sound was a tortured meld of hatred and venom. That was Nat, sunhaired loving mother of six, with her face a strained mask of frustration. "I didn't risk my life and leave my family and, and train for years and bleed and sweat and toil so my labor could fall . . . to . . . a bunch of goddamned *monkeys!*"

Brew pulled her back to her seat, but by now the crowd was muttering and arguing to itself. The noise grew louder. There was shouting. The yelling, too, grew in intensity.

Jase shouted over the throng. "Let's talk this out peacefully!"

Brew was standing, screaming at the people who disagreed with him and Natalie. Now it was becoming a shoving match, and Brew was getting more furious.

Doc pushed his way into the crowd, hoping to reach Brew and calm him. The room was beginning to break down into tangled knots of angry, emotionally charged people.

He grabbed the big man's arm and tried to speak, but the Swede turned bright baleful eyes on him and swung a heavy fist.

Doc felt pain explode in his jaw and tasted blood. He fell to the ground and was helped up again, Brew standing over him challengingly. "Stay out of our lives, *Doctor,*" he sneered, openly now. "You've never helped anything before. Don't try to start now."

He tried to speak but felt the pain, and knew his jaw was fractured. A soft hand took his arm and he turned to see Elise, big green eyes luminous with pity and fear. Without struggling, he allowed her to take him to the ship infirmary.

As they left the auditorium he could hear the shouting and struggling, Jase on the microphone trying to calm them, and the coldly murderous voices that screamed for "no monkey Grandchildren."

He tried to turn his head towards the distant sound of argument as Elise set the bone and injected quick-healing serums. She took his face and kissed him softly, with more affection than she had shown in months, and said, "They're afraid, Harry." Then kissed him again, and led him home.

Doc raged inwardly at his jaw that week. Its pain prevented him from joining in the debate which now flared in every corner of the colony.

Light images swarm across his closed eyes as the sound of fists pounding against wood roused him from dreamless sleep. Doc threw on a robe and padded barefoot across the cool stone floor of his house, peering at the front door with distaste before opening it. Jase was there, and some of the others, sombre and implacable in the morning's cool light.

"We've decided, Doc," Jase said at last. Doc sensed what was coming. "The children are not to breed. I'm sorry, I know how you feel—" Doc grunted. How could Jase know how he felt when he wasn't sure himself? "We're going to have to ask you to perform the sterilizations . . ." Doc's hearing faded down to a low fuzz, and he barely heard the words. This is the way the world ends . . .

Jase looked at his friend, feeling the distance between them grow. "All right. We'll give you a week to change your mind. If not, Elise or Greg will have to do it." Without saying anything more they left.

Doc moped around that morning, even though Elise swore to him that she'd never do it. She fussed over him as they fixed breakfast in the kitchen. The gas stove burned methane reclaimed from waste products, the flame giving more heat control than the microwaves some of the others had. Normally Doc enjoyed scrambling eggs and wok-ing fresh slivered vegetables into crisp perfection, but nothing she said or did seemed to lift him out of his mood.

He ate lightly, then got dressed and left the house. Although she was concerned, Elise did not follow him.

He went out to the distillery, where Greg spent much of his time under the sun, drunk and playing at being happy. "Would you?" The pain still muffled Doc's words. "Would you sterilize them?"

Greg looked at him blearily, still hung over from the previous evening's alcoholic orgy. "You don't understand, man." There was a stirring sound from the sheltered bedroom behind the distillery, and a woman's waking groan. Doc knew it wasn't Jill. "You just don't understand."

Doc sat down, wishing he had the nerve to ask for a drink. "Maybe I don't. Do you?"

"No. No, I don't. So I'll follow the herd. I'm a builder. I build roads, and I build houses. I'll leave the moralizing to you big brains."

Doc tried to say something and found that no words would come. He needed something. He needed . . .

"Here, Doc. You know you want it." Greg handed him a cannister with a straw in it. "Best damn vodka in the world." He paused, and the slur dropped from his voice. "And this is the world, Doc. For us. For the rest of our lives. You've just got to learn to roll with it." He smiled again and mixed himself an evil-looking drink.

Greg's guest had evidently roused herself and dressed. Doc could hear her now, singing a snatch of song as she left. He didn't want to recognize the voice.

"Got any orange juice?" Doc mumbled, after sipping the vodka.

Greg tossed him an orange. "A real man works for his pleasures."

Doc laughed and took another sip of the burning fluid. "Good lord. What *is* that mess you're drinking?"

"It's a Black Samurai. Sake and soy sauce."

Doc choked. "How can you drink that stuff?"

"Variety, my friend. The stimulation of the bizarre."

Doc was silent for a long time. Senses swimming he watched the sun climb, feeling the warmth as morning melted into afternoon. He downed a slug of his third screwdriver and said irritably, "You can't do it, Greg. If you sterilize the children, it's over."

"So what? It's over anyway. If they wanna let a drunk slit the pee pees of their . . . shall we say atavistic progeny? Yeah, that sounds nice. Well, if they want me to do it, I guess I'll have to do it." He looked at Doc very carefully. "I do have my sense of civic duty. How about you, Doc?"

"I tried." He mumbled, feeling the liquor burning his throat, feeling the light-headedness exert its pull. "I tried. And I've failed."

"You've failed so far. What were your goals?"

"To keep—" He took a drink. Damn, that felt good. "To keep the colony healthy. That's what. It's a disaster. We're at each other's throats. We kill our babies—"

Doc lowered his head, unable to continue.

They were both silent, then Greg said, "If I've gotta do it, I will, Doc. If it's not me, it'll be someone else who reads a couple of medical texts and wants to play doctor. I'm sorry."

Doc sat, thinking. His hands were shaking. "I can't do that." He couldn't even feel the pain anymore.

"Then do what you gotta do, man," and Greg's voice was dead sober.

"Will you . . . can you help me?" Doc bit his lip. "This is *my* civic duty, you know?"

"Yea, I know." He shook his head. "I'm sorry. I wish I could help."

A few minutes passed, then Doc said drunkenly, "There's got to be a way. There just has to be."

"Wish I could help, Doc."

"I wish you could too," Doc said sincerely, then rose and staggered back to his house.

It rained the night he made his decision, one of the quick, hot rains that swept from the coast to the mountains in a thunderclap of fury. It would make a perfect cover.

He gathered his medical texts, a Bible and a few other books, regretting that most of the information available to him was electronically encoded. Doc took one of the silent stunners from the armory. The nonlethal weapons had only been used as livestock controllers. There had never been another need, until now. From the infirmary he took a portable medical kit, stocking it with extra bandages and medicine, then took it all to the big cargo flyer.

It was collapsible, with a fabric fusilage held rigid by highly compressed air in fabric structural tubing. He put it in one of the soundless electric trucks and inflated it behind the children's complex.

There was plenty of room inside the fence for building and for a huge playground with fruit trees and all the immemorial toys of the very young. After the children had learned to operate a latch, Brew had made a lock for the gate and given everyone a key. Doc clicked it open and moved in.

He stayed in the shadows, creeping close to the main desk where Elise worked.

You can't follow where I must go, he thought regretfully. *You and I are the only fully trained medical personnel. You must stay with the others. I'm sorry, darling.*

And he stunned her to sleep silently, moving up to catch her head as it slumped to the table. For the last time, he gently kissed her mouth and her closed eyes.

The children were in the left wing—one room for each sex, with floors all mattress and no covers, because they could not be taught to use a bed. He sprayed the sound waves up and down the sleeping forms. The parabolic reflector leaked a little, so that his arm was numb to the elbow when he was finished. He shook his hand, trying to get some feeling back into it, then gave up and settled into the hard work of carrying the children to the flyer.

He hustled them through the warm rain, bending under their weight but still working swiftly. Doc arranged them on the fabric floor in positions that looked comfortable—the positions of sleeping men rather than sleeping animals. For some time he stood looking down at Jerry his son and at Lori his daughter, thinking things he could not afterwards remember.

He flew North. The flyer was slow and not soundless; it must have awakened people, but he'd have some time before anyone realized what had happened.

Where the forest had almost petered out he hovered down and landed gently enough that only a slumbering moan rose from the children. Good. He took half of them, including Jerry and Lori, and spread them out under the trees. After he had made sure that they had cover from the air he took the other packages, the books and the medical kit, and hid them under a bush a few yards away from the children.

He stole one last look at them, his heirs, small and defenseless, asleep. He could see Elise in them, in the color of their hair, as Elise could see him in their eyes and cheeks.

Kneading his shoulder, he hurried back to the ship. There was more for him to do.

Skipping the ship off again, he cruised thirty miles west, near the stark ridge of mountains, their sombre grey still broken only sparsely by patches of green. There he left the other seven children. Let the two groups develop separately, he thought. They wouldn't starve, and they wouldn't die of exposure, not with the pelts they had grown. Many would remain alive, and free. He hoped Jerry and Lori would be among them.

Doc lifted the flyer off and swept it out to the ocean. Only a quarter mile offshore were the first of the islands, lush now with

primitive foliage. They spun beneath him, floating brownish-green upon a still blue sea.

Now he could feel his heartbeat, taste his fear. But there was resolve, too, more certain and calm than any he had known in his life.

He cut speed and locked the controls, setting the craft on a gradual decline. Shivering already, he pulled on his life jacket and walked to the emergency hatch, screwing it open quickly.

The wind whipped his face, the cutting edge of salt narrowing his eyes. Peering against the wall of air pressure he was able to see the island coming up on him now, looming close. The water was only a hundred feet below him, now eighty, sixty . . .

The rumbling of the shallow breakers joined with the tearing wind, and, fighting his fear, he waited until the last possible moment before hurling himself from the doorway.

He remembered falling.

He remembered hitting the water at awful speed, the spray ripping into him, the physical impact like the blow of a great hand. When his head broke surface Doc wheezed for air, swallowed salty liquid and thrashed for balance.

In the distance, he saw the flash of light, and a moment later the shattering roar as the flyer spent itself on the rocky shore.

Jase was tired. He was often tired lately, although he still managed to get his work done.

The fields had only recently become unkempt, as Marlow and Billie and Jill and the others grew more and more inclined to pick their vegetables from their backyard gardens.

So just he and a few more still rode out to the fields on the tractors, still kept close watch on the herds, still did the hand-pruning so necessary to keep the fruit trees healthy.

The children were of some help. Ten years ago a few of them had been captured around the foothill area. They had been sterilized, of course, and taught to weed, and carry firewood, and a few other simple tasks.

Jase leaned on his staff and watched the shaggy figures moving along the street, sweeping and cleaning.

He had grown old on this world, their Ridgeback. He regretted much that had happened here, especially that night thirty-some years before when Doc had taken the children.

Taken them—where? Some argued for the islands, some for the

West side of the mountain range. Some believed that the children had died in the crash of the flyer. Jase had believed that, until the adult Piths were captured. Now, it was hard to say what happened.

It was growing chill now, the streetlights winking on to brighten the long shadows a setting Tau Ceti cast upon the ground. He drew his coat tighter across his shoulders and walked back to his house. It was a lonelier place to be since June had died, but it was still home.

Fumbling with the latch, he pushed the door open and reached around for the lightswitch. As it flicked on, he froze.

My God.

"Hello, Jase." The figure was tall and spare, clothes ragged, but greying hair and beard cut squarely. Three of the children were with him.

After all this time . . .

"Doc . . ." Jase said, still unbelieving. "It is you, isn't it?"

The bearded man smiled uncertainly, showing teeth that were white but chipped. "It's been a long time, Jase. A very long time."

The three Piths were quiet and alert, sniffing the air of this strange place.

"Are these—?"

"Yes. Jerry and Lori. And Eve. And a small addition." One of the three—God, could it be Eve? sniffed up to Jase. The soft golden fur on her face was tinged with grey, but she carried a young child at her breast.

Jerry stood tall for a preman, eyeing Jase warily. He carried a sharpened stick in one knobby hand.

Jase sat down, speechless. He looked up into the burning eyes of the man he had known thirty years before. "You're still officially under a death sentence, you know."

Doc nodded his head. "For kidnapping?"

"Murder. No one was sure what had happened to you, whether you or any of the children had survived."

Doc, too, sat down. For the first time the light in his eyes dimmed. "Yes. We survived. I swam to shore after crashing the flyer, and found the place where I had left the children." He thought for a moment, then asked quietly. "How is Elise? And all the others?"

Jase said nothing, unable to raise his eyes from the floor. At

last he beckoned a small voice. "She died three years ago, Doc. She was never the same after you left. She thought you were dead. That the children were dead. Couldn't you have at least told her about your plan? Or gotten her a message?"

Doc's fingers played absently with his beard as he shook his head. "I couldn't involve her. I couldn't. Could you . . . show me where she's buried, Jase?"

"Of course."

"What about the others?"

"Well, none of the people were the same after the children left. Some just seemed to lose purpose. Brew's dead. Greg drank himself under. Four of the others have died." Jase paused, thinking. "Do any of the others know you're here?"

"No. I slipped in just at dusk. I wasn't sure what kind of a reception I'd get."

"I'm still not sure." Jase hesitated. "Why did you do it?"

The room was quiet, save for a scratching sound as Jerry fingered an ear. Fleas? Absurd. Jill had never uncrated them.

"I had to know, Jase," he said. There was no uncertainty in his voice. In fact, there was an imperious quality he had never had in the old days. "The question was: Would they breed true? Was the Pith effect only temporary?"

"Was it?"

"No. It persisted. I had to know if they were regressing or evolving, and they remained the same in subsequent generations, save for natural selection, and there isn't much of that."

Jase watched Lori, her stubby fingers untangling mats in her fur. Her huge brown eyes were alive and vital. She was a lovely creature, he decided. "Doc, what are the children?"

"What do you think?"

"You know what I think. An alien species wants our worlds. In a hundred years they'll land and take them. What they'll do with the children is anybody's guess. I—" He couldn't bring himself to look at Eve. "I wish you'd sterilized them, Doc."

"Maybe you do, Jase. But, you see, I don't believe in your aliens."

Jase's breath froze in his throat.

"They might want our world," said Doc, "but why would they want our life forms? Everything but Man is spreading like a plague of locusts. If someone wants Ridgeback, why haven't they done something about it? By the time they land, terrestrial life

will have an unstoppable foothold. Look at all the thousands of years we've been trying to stamp out just one life form, the influenza viruses.

"No, I've got another idea. Do you know what a locust is?"

"I know what they are. I've never seen one."

"As individuals they're something like a short grasshopper. As individuals, they hide or sleep in the daytime and come out at night. In open country you can hear them chirping after dusk, but otherwise nobody notices them. But they're out there, eating and breeding and breeding and eating, getting more numerous over a period of years, until one day there are too many for the environment to produce enough food.

"Then comes the change. On Earth it hasn't happened in a long time because they aren't allowed to get that numerous. But it used to be that when there were enough of them, they'd grow bigger and darker and more aggressive. They'd eat everything in sight, and when all the food was gone, and when there were enough of them, they'd suddenly take off all at once.

"That's when you'd get your plague of locusts. They'd drop from the air in a cloud thick enough and broad enough to darken the sky, and when they landed in a farmer's field he could kiss his crops goodbye. They'd raze it to the soil, then take off again, leaving nothing."

Jase took off his glasses and wiped them. "I don't see what it is you're getting at."

"Why do they do it? Why were locusts built that way?"

"Evolution, I guess. After the big flight they'd be spread over a lot of territory. I'd say they'd have a much bigger potential food supply."

"Right. Now consider this. Take a biped that's man shaped, enough so to use a tool, but without intelligence. Plant him on a world and watch him grow. Say he's adaptable; say he eventually spread over most of the fertile land masses of the planet. Now what?

"Now an actual physical change takes place. The brain expands. The body hair drops away. Evolution had adapted him to his climate, but that was when he had hair. Now he's got to use his intelligence to keep from freezing to death. He'll discover fire. He'll move out into areas he couldn't live in before. Eventually he'll cover the whole planet, and he'll build spacecraft and head for the stars."

Jase shook his head. *"But why would they change back,* Doc?"

"Something in the genes, maybe. Something that didn't mutate."

"Not *how,* Doc. We know it's possible. *Why?"*

"We're going back to being grasshoppers. Maybe we've reached our evolutionary peak. Natural selection stops when we start protecting the weak ones, instead of allowing those with defective genes to die a natural death."

He paused, smiling. "I mean, look at us, Jase. You walk with a cane now. I haven't been able to read for five years, my eyes have weakened so. And we were the best Earth had to offer; the best minds, the finest bodies. Chris only squeeked by with his glasses because he was such a damn good meteorologist."

Jase's face held a flash of long-forgotten pain. "And I guess they still didn't choose carefully enough."

"No," Doc agreed soberly. "They didn't. On Earth we protected the sick, allowed them to breed, instead of letting them die . . . with pacemakers, with insulin, artificial kidneys and plastic hip joints and trusses. The mentally ill and retarded fought in the courts for the right to reproduce. Okay, it's humane. Nature isn't humane. The infirm will do their job by dying, and no morality or humane court rulings or medical advances will change the natural course of things for a long, long time."

"How long?"

"I don't know how stable they are. It could be millions of years, or . . . ?" Doc shrugged. "We've changed the course of our own development. Perhaps a simpler creature is needed to colonize a world. Something that has no choice but to change or die. Jase, remember the Cold War?"

"I read about it."

"And the Belt Embargo? Remember diseromide, and smog, and the spray-can thing, and the day the fusion seawater distillery at San Francisco went up and took the Bay area with it, and four states had to have their water flown in for a month?"

"So?"

"A dozen times we could have wiped out all life on Earth. As soon as we've used our intelligence to build spacecraft and seed another world, intelligence becomes a liability. Some old anthropologist even had a theory that a species needs abstract intelligence before it can prey on its own kind. The development of fire gave Man time to sit back and dream up ways to take things he

hadn't earned. You know how gentle the children are, and you can remember how the carefully chosen citizens of Ridgeback acted the night we voted on the children's right to reproduce."

"So you gave that to them, Doc. They are reproducing. And when we're gone they'll spread all over the world. But are they *human?*"

Doc pondered, wondering what to say. For many years he had talked only to the children. The children never interrupted, never disagreed . . . "I had to know that too. Yes. They're human."

Jase looked closely at the man he had called friend so many years ago. Doc was so sure. He didn't discuss; he lectured. Jase felt an alienness in him that was deeper than the mere passage of time.

"Are you going to stay here now?"

"I don't know. The children don't need me anymore, though they've treated me like a god. I can't pass anything on to them. I think our culture has to die before theirs can grow."

Jase fidgeted, uncomfortable. "Doc. Something I've got to tell you. I haven't told anyone. It's thirty years now, and nobody knows but me."

Doc frowned. "Go on."

"Remember the day Roy died? Something in the Orion blew all the motors at once? Well, he talked to Cynnie first. And she talked to me, before *she* disappeared. Doc, he got a laser message from Earth, and he knew he couldn't ever send it down. It would have destroyed us. So he blew the motors."

Doc waited, listening intently.

"It seems that every child being born on Earth nowadays bears an uncanny resemblance to Pithicanthropus erectus. They were begging us to make the Ridgeback colony work. Because Earth is doomed."

"I'm glad nobody knew that."

Jase nodded. "If intelligence is bad for us, it's bad for Earth. They've fired their starships. Now they're ready for another cycle."

"Most of them'll die. They're too crowded."

"Some will survive. If not there, then, thanks to you, here." He smiled. A touch of the old Jase in his eyes. "They'll *have* to become men, you know."

"Why do you put it like that?"

"Because Jill uncrated the wolves, to help thin out the herds."

"They'll cull the children, too," Doc nodded. "I couldn't help them become men, but I think that will do it. They will have to band together, and find tools, and fire." His voice took on a dreamy quality. "Eventually, the wolves will come out of the darkness to join them at their campfires, and Man will have dogs again." He smiled. "I hope they don't overbreed them like we did on Earth. I doubt if chihuahuas have ever forgotten us for what we did to them."

"Doc," Jase said, urgently, "will you trust me? Will you wait for a minute while I leave? I . . . I want to try something. If you decide to go there may never be another chance."

Doc looked at him, mystified. "All right, I'll wait."

Jase limped out of the door. Doc sat, watching his charges, proud of their alertness and flexibility, their potential for growth in the new land.

There was a creaking as the door swung open.

The woman's hair had been blond, once. Now it was white, heavy wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, years of hardship and disappointment souring what had once been beauty.

She blinked, at first seeing only Doc.

"Hello, Nat," he said to her.

She frowned. "What . . . ?" Then she saw Eve.

Their eyes locked, and Nat would have drawn back save for Jase's insistent hand at her back.

Eve drew close, peering into her mother's face as if trying to remember her.

The old woman stuttered, then said, "Eve?" The Pith cocked her head and came closer, touching her mother's hand. Nat pulled it back, eyes wide.

Eve cooed, smiling, holding her baby out to Nat.

At first she flinched, then looked at the child, so much like Eve had been, so much . . . and slowly without words or visible emotion, she took the child from Eve and cradled it, held it, and began to tremble. Her hand stretched out helplessly, and Eve came closer, took her mother's hand and the three of them, mother, child and grandchild, children of different worlds, held each other. Nat cried for the pain that had driven them apart, the love that had brought them together.

Doc stood at the edge of the woods, looking back at the colonists who waved to them, asking for a swift return.

Perhaps so. Perhaps they could, now. Enough time had passed that understanding was a thing to be sought rather than avoided. And he missed the company of his own kind.

No, he corrected himself, the children *were* his kind. As he had told Jase, without explaining, he knew that they were human. He had tested it the only way he could, by the only means available.

Eve walked beside him, her hand seeking his. "Doc," she cooed, her birdlike singsong voice loving. He gently took their child from her arms, kissing it.

At over sixty years of age, it felt odd to be a new father, but if his lover had her way, as she usually did, his strange family might grow larger still.

Together, the five of them headed into the forest, and home.

THE THAW

by Tanith Lee

Cryogenics, or the art of cold-storage for the wealthy half-dead in hope that some future generation will be foolish enough to defrost them, caught the public attention a number of years ago. Since then it has receded into the limbo of other ten-day wonders, but it is not entirely forgotten. There still exist organizations that are trying to make it effective, endeavoring to work out ways of reviving the frigid semi-cadavers. Tanith Lee, who is achieving a high reputation for her amazing variety of imaginative creations, takes on the cryogenic problem with a twist that may never have occurred to the would-be immortals laboring amid the icepacks.

Ladies first, they said.

That was O.K. Then they put a histotrace on the lady in question, and called me.

"No thanks," I said.

"Listen," they said, "you're a generative blood-line descendant of Carla Brice. Aren't you interested, for God's sake? This is a unique moment, a unique experience. She's going to need support, understanding. A contact. Come on. Don't be frigid about it."

"I guess Carla is more frigid than I'm ever likely to be."

They laughed, to keep up the informalities. Then they mentioned the Institute grant I'd receive, just for hanging around and

being supportive. To a quasi-unemployed artist, that was temptation and a half. They also reminded me that on this initial bout there wouldn't be much publicity, so later, if I wanted to capitalize as an eyewitness, and providing good old Carla was willing—I had a sudden vision of getting very rich, very quick, and with the minimum of effort, and I succumbed ungracefully.

Which accurately demonstrates my three strongest qualities: laziness, optimism, and blind stupidity. Which in turn sums up the whole story, more or less. And that's probably why I was told to write it down for the archives of the human race. I can't think of a better way to depress and wreck the hopes of frenzied, shackled, bleating humanity.

But to return to Carla. She was, I believe, my great-great-great-great grandmother. Give or take a great. Absolute accuracy isn't one of my talents, either. The relevant part is, however, that at thirty-three, Carla had developed the rare heart complaint valu —val—well, she'd developed it. She had a few months, or less, and so she opted, along with seventy other people that year, to undergo Cryogenic Suspension till a cure could be found. Cry Sus had been getting progressively more popular, ever since the 1980s. Remember? It's the freezing method of holding a body in refrigerated stasis, indefinitely preserving thereby flesh, bones, organs and the rest, perfect and pristine, in a frosty crystal box. (Just stick a tray of water in the freezer and see for yourself.) It may not strike you as cozy anymore, but that's hardly surprising. In 1993, seventy-one persons, of whom four-or-five-or-six-great granny Carla was one, saw it as the only feasible alternative to death. In the following two hundred years, four thousand others copied their example. They froze their malignancies, their unreliable hearts, and their corroding tissues, and as the light faded from their snowed-over eyes, they must have dreamed of waking up in the fabulous future.

Funny thing about the future. Each next second is the future. And now it's the present. And now it's the past.

Those all-together four thousand and ninety-one who deposited their physiognomies in the cold-storage compartments of the world were looking forward to the future. And here it was. And we were it.

And smack in the middle of this future, which I naively called Now, was I, Tacey Brice, a rotten little unskilled artist, painting gimcrack flying saucers for the spacines. There was a big flying

saucer sighting boom that year of 2193. Either you recollect that, or you don't. Nearly as big as the historic boom between the 1930s and '90s. Psychologists had told us it was our human inadequacy, searching all over for a father-mother figure to replace God. Besides, we were getting desperate. We'd penetrated our solar system to a limited extent, but without meeting anybody on the way.

That's another weird thing. When you read the speculativia of the 1900s, you can see just how much they expected of us. It was going to be all or nothing. Either the world would become a miracle of rare device with plastisteel igloos balanced on the stratosphere and metal giblets, or we'd have gone out in a blast of radiation. Neither of which had happened. We'd had problems, of course. Over two hundred years, problems occur. There had been the Fission Tragedy, and the World Flood of '14. There'd been the huge pollution clear-ups complete with the rationing that entailed, and one pretty nasty pandemic. They had set us back, that's obvious. But not halted us. So we reached 2193 mostly unscathed, with a whizz-bang technology not quite as whizz, or bang, as prophesied. A place where doors opened when they saw who you were, and with a colony on Mars, but where they hadn't solved the unemployment problem or the geriatric problem. Up in the ether there were about six hundred buzz-whuzzes headed out into nowhere, bleeping information about earth. But we hadn't landed on Alpha Centauri yet. And if the waste-disposal jammed, brother, it jammed. What I'm trying to say (superfluously, because you're ahead of me), is that their future, those four thousand and ninety-one, their future which was our present, wasn't as spectacular as they'd trusted or feared. Excepting the Salenic Vena-derivative drugs, which had rendered most of the diseases of the 1900s and the 2000s obsolete.

And suddenly, one day, someone had a notion.

"Hey, guys," this someone suggested, "you recall all those sealed frosty boxes the medic centers have? You know, with the on-ice carcinomas and valu-diddums in 'em? Well, don't you think it'd be grand to defrost the lot of them and pump 'em full of health?"

"Crazy," said everybody else, and wet themselves with enthusiasm.

After that, they got the thing organized on a global scale. And first off, not wanting to chance any public mishaps, they intended

to unfreeze a single frost box, in relative privacy. Perhaps they put all the names in a hat. Whatever, they picked Carla Brice, or Brr-Ice, if you liked that Newsies' tablotape pun.

And since Carla Brr-Ice might feel a touch extra chilly, coming back to life two hundred years after she's cryonised out of it, they dredged up a blood-line descendant to hold her cold old thirty-three-year hand. And that was Tacey Brr-Ice. Me.

The room below was pink, but the cold pink of strawberry ice cream. There were forty doctors of every gender prowling about in it and round the crystal slab. It put me in mind of a pack of wolves with a carcass they couldn't quite decide when to eat. But then, I was having a nervous attack, up on the spectator gallery where they'd sat me. The countdown had begun two days ago, and I'd been ushered in at noon today. For an hour now, the crystal had been clear. I could see a sort of blob in it, which gradually resolved into a naked woman. Straight off, even with her lying there stiff as a board and utterly defenseless, I could tell she was the sort of lady who scared me dizzy. She was large and well-shaped, with a mane of dark red hair. She was the type that goes outdoor swimming at all seasons, skis, shoots rapids in a canoe, becomes the co-ordinator of a moon colony. The type that bites. Valu-diddums had got her, but nothing else could have done. Not child, beast, nor man. Certainly not another woman. Oh my. And this was my multiple-great granny that I was about to offer the hand of reassurance.

Another hour, and some dial and click mechanisms down in the strawberry ice room started to dicker. The wolves flew in for the kill. A dead lioness, that was Carla. Then the box rattled and there was a yell. I couldn't see for scrabbling medics.

"What happened?"

The young medic detailed to sit on the spec gallery with me sighed.

"I'd say she's opened her eyes."

The young medic was black as space and beautiful as the stars therein. But he didn't give a damn about me. You could see he was in love with Carla the lioness. I was simply a pain he had to put up with for two or three hours, while he stared at the goddess beneath.

But now the medics had drawn off. I thought of the Sleeping Beauty story, and Snow White. Her eyes were open indeed. Cop-

pery brown to tone with the mane. She didn't appear dazed. She appeared contemptuous. Precisely as I'd anticipated. Then the crystal box lid began to rise.

"Jesus," I said.

"Strange you should say that," said the black medic. His own wonderful eyes fixed on Carla, he'd waxed profound and enigmatic. "The manner in which we all still use these outdated religious expletives: *God, Christ, Hell,* long after we've ceased to credit their religious basis as such. The successful completion of this experiment in life-suspense and restoration has a bearing on the same matter," he murmured, his inch-long lashes brushing the plastase pane. "You've read of the controversy regarding this process? It was seen at one era as an infringement of religious faith."

"Oh, yes?"

I kept on staring at him. Infinitely preferable to Carla, with her open eyes, and the solitary bending medic with the supadermic.

"The idea of the soul," said the medic on the gallery. "The immortal part which survives death. But what befalls a soul trapped for years, centuries, in a living yet statically frozen body? In a physical limbo, a living death. You see the problem this would pose for the religious?"

"I—uh—"

"But, of course, today . . ." he spread his hands. "There is no such barrier to lucid thought. The life force, we now know, resides purely in the brain, and thereafter in the motor nerves, the spinal cord, and attendant reflexive centers. There is no *soul.*"

Then he shut up and nearly swooned away, and I realized Carla had met his eye.

I looked, and she was sitting, part reclined against some medic's arm. The medic was telling her where she was and what year it was and how, by this evening, the valu-diddums would be no more than a bad dream, and then she could go out into the amazing new world with her loving descendant, who she could observe up there on the gallery.

She did spare a glance for me. It lasted about .09 of a mini-instant. I tried to unglue my mouth and flash her a warming welcoming grin, but before I could manage it, she was back to studying the black medic.

At that moment somebody came and whipped me away for celebratory alcohol, and two hours later, when I'd celebrated

rather too much, they took me up a plushy corridor to meet Carla, skin to skin.

Actually, she was dressed on this occasion. She'd had a shower and a couple of post-defrosting tests and some shots and the anti-valu-diddums stuff. Her hair was smouldering like a fire in a forest. She wore the shiny smock medical centers insisted that you wore, but on her it was like a design original. She'd even had a tan frozen in with her, or maybe it was my dazzled eyes that made her seem all bronzed and glowing. Nobody could look that good, that *healthy,* after two hundred years on ice. And if they did, they shouldn't. Her room was crammed with flowers and bottles of scent and exotic light paintings, courtesy of the Institute. And then they trundled me in.

Not astoundingly, she gazed at me with bored amusement. Like she'd come to the dregs at the bottom of the wine.

"This is Tacey," somebody said, making free with my forename.

Carla spoke, in a voice of maroon velvet.

"Hallo, er, Tacey." Patently, my cognomen was a big mistake. Never mind, she'd overlook it for now. "I gather we are related."

I was drunk, but it wasn't helping.

"I'm your gr—yes, we are, but—" I intelligently blurted. The "but" was going to be a prologue to some nauseating, placatory, crawler's drivel about her gorgeousness and youth. It wasn't necessary, not even to let her know how scared I was. She could tell that easily, plus how I'd shrunk to a shadow in her high-voltage glare. Before I could complete my hiccupping sycophancy, anyway, the medic in charge said: "Tacey is your link, Mz Brice, with civilization as it currently is."

Carla couldn't resist it. She raised one manicured eyebrow, frozen exquisite for two centuries. If Tacey was the link, civilization could take a walk.

"My apartment," I went on blurting, "it's medium, but—"

What was I going to say now? About how all my grant from the Institute I would willingly spend on gowns and perfumes and skis and automatic rifles, or whatever Carla wanted. How I'd move out and she could have the apartment to herself. (She wouldn't like the spacine murals on the walls.)

"It's just a bri—a bridge," I managed. "Till you get acclimatosed—atised."

She watched me as I made a fool of myself, or rather, displayed

my true foolishness. Finally I comprehended the message in her copper eyes: Don't bother. That was all: Don't bother. You're a failure, Carla's copper irises informed me, as if I didn't know. Don't make excuses. You can alter nothing. I expect nothing from you. I will stay while I must in your ineffectual vicinity, and you may fly round me and scorch your wings if you like. When I am ready, I shall leave immediately, soaring over your sky like a meteor. You can offer no aid, no interest, no grain I cannot garner for myself.

"How kind of Tacey," Carla's voice said. "Come, darling, and let me kiss you."

Somehow, I'd imagined her still as very cold from the frosty box, but she was blood heat. Ashamed, I let her brush my cheek with her meteoric lips. Perhaps I'd burn.

"I'd say this calls for a toast," said the medic in charge. "But just rose-juice for Mz Brice, I'm afraid, at present."

Carla smiled at him, and I hallucinated a rose-bush, thorns too, eviscerated by her teeth. Lions drink blood, not roses.

I got home paralyzed and floundered about trying to change things. In the middle of attempting to re-spray-paint over a wall, I sank on a pillow and slept. Next day I was angry, the way you can only be angry over something against which you are powerless. So damn it. Let her arrive and see space-shuttles, motherships, and whirly bug-eyed monsters all across the plastase. And don't pull the ready-cook out of the alcove to clean the feed-pipes behind it that I hadn't seen for three years. Or dig the plant out of the cooled-water dispenser. Or buy any new garments, blinds, rugs, sheets. And don't conceal the Wage-Increment cheques when they skitter down the chute. Or prop up the better spacines I'd illustrated, on the table where she won't miss them.

I visited her one more time during the month she stayed at the Institute. I didn't have the courage not to take her anything, although I knew that whatever I offered would be wrong. Actually, I had an impulse to blow my first grant cheque and my W-I together and buy her a little antique stiletto of Toledo steel. It was blatantly meant to commit murder with, and as I handed it to her I'd bow and say, "For you, Carla. I just know you can find a use for it." But naturally I didn't have the bravura. I bought her a flagon of expensive scent she didn't need and was rewarded by seeing her put it on a shelf with three other identically packaged flagons, each twice the size of mine. She was wearing a reclin-

erobe of amber silk, and I almost reached for sunglasses. We didn't say much. I tottered from her room, sunburned and peeling. And that night I painted another flying saucer on the wall.

The day she left the Institute, they sent a mobile for me. I was supposed to collect and ride to the apartment with Carla, to make her feel homey. I felt sick.

Before I met her, though, the medic in charge wafted me into his office.

"We're lucky," he said. "Mz Brice is a most independent lady. Her readjustment has been, in fact, remarkable. None of the traumas or rebuttals we've been anxious about. I doubt if most of the other subjects to be revived from Cryogenesis will demonstrate the equivalent rate of success."

"They're really reviving them, then?" I inquired lamely. I was glad to be in here, putting off my fourth congress with inadequacy.

"A month from today. Dependent on the ultimately positive results of our post-resuscitation analysis of Mz Brice. But, as I intimated, I hardly predict any hitch there."

"And how long," I swallowed, "how long do you think Carla will want to stay with me?"

"Well, she seems to have formed quite an attachment for you, Tacey. It's a great compliment, you know, from a woman like that. A proud, volatile spirit. But she needs an anchor for a while. We all need our anchors. Probably, her proximity will benefit you, in return. Don't you agree?"

I didn't answer, and he concluded I was overwhelmed. He started to describe to me that glorious scheduled event, the global link-up, when every single cryogone was to be revived, as simultaneously with each other as they could arrange it. The process would be going out on five channels of the Spatials, visible to us all. Technology triumphant yet again, bringing us a minute or two of transcendental catharsis. I thought about the beautiful black medic and his words on religion. And this is how we replaced it, presumably (when we weren't saucer-sighting), shedding tears sentimentally over four thousand and ninety idiots fumbling out of the deep-freeze.

"One last, small warning," the medic in charge added. "You may notice—or you may not, I can't be positive—the occasional lapse in the behavioural patterns of Mz Brice."

There was a fantasy for me. Carla, *lapsed*.

"In what way?" I asked, miserably enjoying the unlikelihood.

"Mere items. A mood, an aberration—a brief disorientation even. These are to be expected in a woman reclaimed by life after two hundred years, and in a world she is no longer familiar with. As I explained, I looked for much worse and far greater quantity. The odd personality slip is inevitable. You musn't be alarmed. At such moments the most steadying influence on Mz Brice will be a non-Institutional normalcy of surroundings. And the presence of yourself."

I nearly laughed.

I would have, if the door hadn't opened, and if Carla, in mock red-lynx fur, hadn't stalked into the room.

I didn't even try to create chatter. Alone in the mobile, with the auto driving us along the cool concrete highways, there wasn't any requirement to pretend for the benefit of others. Carla reckoned I was a schmoil, and I duly schmoiled. Mind you, now and again, she put out a silk paw and gave me a playful tap. Like when she asked me where I got my hair *done*. But I just told her about the ready-set parlours and she quit. Then again, she asked a couple of less abstract questions. Did libraries still exist, that was one. The second one was if I slept well.

I went along with everything in a dank stupor. I think I was half kidding myself it was going to be over soon. Then the mobile drove into the auto-lift of my apartment block, the gates gaped and we got out. As my door recognized me and split wide, it abruptly hit me that Carla and I were going to be hand in glove for some while. A month at least, while the Institute computed its final tests. Maybe more, if Carla had my lazy streak somewhere in her bronze and permasteel frame.

She strode into my apartment and stood flaming among the flying saucers and the wine-ringed furniture. The fake-fur looked as if she'd shot it herself. She was a head taller than I was ever going to be. And then she startled me, about the only way she could right then.

"I'm tired, Tacey," said Carla.

No wise-cracks, no vitriol, no stare from Olympus.

She glided to the bedroom. O.K. I'd allocated the bed as hers, the couch as mine. She paused, gold digit on the panel that I'd pre-set to respond to her finger.

"Will you forgive me?" she wondered aloud.

Her voice was soporific. I yawned.

"Sure, Carla."

She stayed behind the closed panels for hours. The day reddened over the city, colours as usual heightened by the weather control that operates a quarter of a mile up. I slumped here and there, unable to eat or rest or read or doodle. I was finding out what it was going to be like, having an apartment and knowing it wasn't mine anymore. Even through a door, Carla dominated.

Around 19, I knocked. No reply.

Intimidated, I slunk off. I wouldn't play the septophones, even with the ear-pieces only, even with the volume way down. Might wake Granny. You see, if you could wake her from two hundred years in the freezer, you could certainly wake her after eight hours on a dormadais.

At twenty-four midnight, she still hadn't come out.

Coward, I knocked again, and feebly called: "Night, Carla. See you tomorrow."

On the couch I had nightmares, or nightcarlas to be explicit. Some were very realistic, like the one where the trust bonds Carla's estate had left for her hadn't accumulated after all and she was destitute, and going to remain with me for ever and ever. Or there were the comic-strip ones where the fake red-lynx got under the cover and bit me. Or the surreal ones where Carla came floating towards me, clad only in her smouldering hair, and everything caught fire from it, and I kept saying, "Please, Carla, don't set the rug alight. Please, Carla, don't set the couch alight." In the end there was merely a dream where Carla bent over me, hissing something like an anaconda—if they do hiss. She wanted me to stay asleep, apparently, and for some reason I was fighting her, though I was almost comatose. The strange thing in this dream was that Carla's eyes had altered from copper to a brilliant topaz yellow, like the lynx's.

It must have been about four in the morning that I woke up. I think it was the washer unit that woke me. Or it could have been the septophones. Or the waste-disposal. Or the drier. Or any of the several gadgets a modern apartment was equipped with. Because they were all on. It sounded like a madhouse. Looked like one. All the lights were on, too. In the middle of chaos: Carla. She was quite naked, the way I'd seen her at the first, but she had

the sort of nakedness that seems like clothes, clean-cut, firm and flawless. The sort that makes me want to hide inside a stone. She was reminiscent of a sorceress in the midst of her sorcery, the erupting mechanisms sprawling round her in the fierce light. I had a silly thought: *Carla's going nova.* Then she turned and saw me. My mouth felt as if it had been security-sealed, but I got out, "You O.K., Carla?"

"I am, darling. Go back to sleep now."

That's the last thing I remember till 10 A.M. the next day.

I wondered initially if Carla and the gadgets had been an additional dream. But when I checked the energy-meter I discovered they hadn't. I was plodding to the ready-cook when Carla emerged from the bedroom in her amber reclinerobe.

She didn't say a word. She just relaxed at the counter and let me be her slave. I got ready to prepare her the large breakfast she outlined. Then I ran her bath. When the water-meter shut off half through, Carla suggested I put in the extra tags to ensure the tub was filled right up.

As she bathed, I sat at the counter and had another nervous attack.

Of course, Carla was predictably curious. Back in 1993, many of our gadgets hadn't been invented, or at least not developed to their present standard. Why not get up in the night and turn everything on? Why did it have to seem sinister? Maybe my sleeping through it practically non-stop was the thing that troubled me. All right. So Carla was a hypnotist. Come to consider, should I run a histotrace myself, in an attempt to learn what Carla was—had been?

But let's face it, what really upset me was the low on the energy-meter, the water-meter taking a third of my week's water tags in one morning. And Carla luxuriously wallowing, leaving me to foot the bill.

Could I say anything? No. I knew she'd immobilize me before I'd begun.

When she came from the bathroom, I asked her did she want to go out. She said no, but I could visit the library, if I would, and pick up this book and tape list she'd called through to them. I checked the call-meter. That was down, too.

"I intend to act the hermit for a while, Tacey," Carla murmured behind me as I guiltily flinched away from the meter. "I don't want to get involved in a furor of publicity. I gather the

news of my successful revival will have been leaked today. The tablotapes will be sporting it. But I understand, by the news publishing codes of the '80s, that unless I approach the Newsies voluntarily, they are not permitted to approach me."

"Yes, that's right." I gazed pleadingly into the air. "I guess you wouldn't ever reconsider that, Carla? It could mean a lot of money. That is, not for you to contact the Newsies. But if you'd all—allow me to on your beh—half."

She chuckled like a lioness with her throat full of gazelle. The hair rose on my neck as she slunk closer. When her big, warm, elegant hand curved over my skull, I shuddered.

"No, Tacey. I don't think I'd care for that. I don't need the cash. My estate investments, I hear, are flourishing."

"I was thinking of m— I was thinking of me, Carla. I cou— could use the tags."

The hand slid from my head and batted me lightly. Somehow, I was glad I hadn't given her the Toledo knife after all.

"No, I don't think so. I think it will do you much more good to continue as you are. Now, run along to the library, darling."

I went mainly because I was glad to get away from her. To utter the spineless whining I had had drained entirely my thin reserves of courage. I was shaking when I reached the auto-lift. I had a wild plan of leaving town, and leaving my apartment with Carla in it, and going to ground. It was more than just inadequacy now. Hunter and hunted. And as I crept through the long grass, her fiery breath was on my heels.

I collected the twenty books and the fifty tapes and paid for the loan. I took them back to the apartment and laid them before my astonishing amber granny. I was too scared even to hide. Much too scared to disobey.

I sat on the sun-patio, though it was the weather control day for rain. Through the plastase panels I heard the tapes educating Carla on every aspect of contemporary life; social, political, economic, geographical, and carnal.

When she summoned me, I fixed lunch. Later, drinks and supper.

Then I was too nervous to go to sleep. I passed out in the bathroom, sitting in the shower cubicle. Had nightcarlas Carla eating salad. Didn't wake up till 10 A.M. Checked. All meters down again.

When I trod on smashed plastase I thought it was sugar. Then I

saw the cooled-water dispenser was in ninety-five bits. Where the plant had been, there was only soil and condensation and trailing roots.

I looked, and everywhere beheld torn-off leaves and tiny clots of earth. There was a leaf by Carla's bedroom. I knocked and my heart knocked to keep my hand company.

But Carla wasn't interested in breakfast, wasn't hungry.

I knew why not. She'd eaten my plant.

You can take a bet I meant to call up the Institute right away. Somehow, I didn't. For one thing, I didn't want to call from the apartment and risk Carla catching me at it. For another, I didn't want to go out and leave her, in case she did something worse. Then again, I was terrified to linger in her vicinity. A *lapse,* the medic in charge had postulated. It was certainly that. Had she done anything like it at the Institute? Somehow I had the idea she hadn't. She'd saved it for me. Out of playful malice.

I dithered for an hour, till I panicked, pressed the call button and spoke the digits. I never heard the door open. She seemed to know exactly when to—*strike;* yes that *is* the word I want. I sensed her there. She didn't even touch me. I let go the call button.

"Who were you calling?" Carla asked.

"Just a guy I used to pair with," I said, but it came out husky and gulped and quivering.

"Well, go ahead. Don't mind me."

Her maroon voice, bored and amused and indifferent to anything I might do, held me like a steel claw. And I discovered I had to turn around and face her. I had to stare into her eyes.

The scorn in them was killing. I wanted to shrivel and roll under the rug, but I couldn't look away.

"But if you're not going to call anyone, run my bath, darling," Carla said.

I ran her bath.

It was that easy. Of course.

She was magnetic. Irresistible.

I couldn't—

I could *not*—

Partly, it had all become incredible. I couldn't picture myself accusing Carla of house-plant-eating to the medics at the Insti-

tute. Who'd believe it? It was nuts. I mean, too nuts even for them. And presently, I left off quite believing it myself.

Nevertheless, somewhere in my brain I kept on replaying those sentences of the medic in charge: *the occasional lapse in the behavioural patterns . . . a mood, an aberration . . .* And against that, point counter-point, there kept on playing that phrase the beautiful black medic had reeled off enigmatically as a cultural jest: *But what befalls a soul trapped for years, centuries, in a living yet statically frozen body?*

Meanwhile, by sheer will, by the force of her persona, she'd stopped me calling. And that same thing stopped me talking about her to anybody on the street, sent me tongue-tied to fetch groceries, sent me grovelling to conjure meals. It was almost as if it also shoved me asleep when she wanted and brought me awake ditto.

Doesn't time fly when you're having fun?

Twenty days, each more or less resembling each, hurried by. Carla didn't do anything else particularly weird, at least not that I saw or detected. But then, I never woke up nights anymore. And I had an insane theory that the meters had been fiddled, because they weren't low, but they felt as if they should be. I hadn't got any more plants. I missed some packaged paper lingerie, but it turned up under Carla's bed, where I'd kicked it when the bed was mine. Twenty days, twenty-five. The month of Carla's post-resuscitation tests was nearly through. One morning, I was stumbling about like a zombie, cleaning the apartment because the dustease had jammed and Carla had spent five minutes in silent comment on the dust. I was moving in that combined sludge of terror, mindlessness and masochistic cringing she'd taught me, when the door signal went.

When I opened the door, there stood the black medic with a slim case of file-tapes. I felt transparent, and that was how he treated me. He gazed straight through me to the empty room where he had hoped my granny would be.

"I'm afraid your call doesn't seem to be working," he said. (Why had I the notion Carla had done something to the call?) "I'd be grateful to see Mz Brice, if she can spare me a few minutes. Just something we'd like to check for the files."

That instant, splendid on her cue, Carla manifested from the bathroom. The medic had seen her naked in the frosty box, but

not a naked that was vaguely and fluently sheathed in a damp towel. It had the predictable effect. As he paused transfixed, Carla bestowed her most gracious smile.

"Sit down," she said. "What check is this? Tacey, darling, why not arrange some fresh coffee?"

Tacey darling went to the coffee cone. Over its bubbling, I heard him say to her, "It's simply that Doctor Something was a little worried by a possible amnesia. Certainly, none of the memory areas seem physically impaired. But you see, here and there on the tape—"

"Give me an example, please," drawled Carla.

The black medic lowered his lashes as if to sweep the tablotape.

"Some confusion over places, and names. Your second husband, Francis, for instance, who you named as Frederick. And there, the red mark—Doctor Something-Else mentioned the satellite disaster of '91, and it seems you did not recall—"

"You're referring to the malfunction of the Ixion 11, which broke up and crashed in the midwest, taking three hundred lives," said Carla. She sounded like a purring textbook. She leaned forward, and I could watch him tremble all the way across from the coffee cone. "Doctor Something and Doctor Something-Else," said Carla, "will have to make allowances for my excitement at rebirth. Now, I can't have you driving out this way for nothing. How about you come to dinner, the night before the great day. Tacey doesn't see nearly enough people her own age. As for me, let's say you'll make a two-hundred-year-old lady very happy."

The air between them was electric enough to form sparks. By the "Great day" she meant, patently, the five-channel Spatial event when her four thousand and ninety confrères got liberated from the sub-zero. But he plainly didn't care so much about defrosting anymore.

The coffee cone boiled over. I noticed with a shock I was crying. Nobody else did.

What I wanted to do was program the ready-cook for the meal, get in some wine, and get the hell out of the apartment and leave the two of them alone. I'd pass the night at one of the all-night Populars, and creep in around 10 A.M. the next morning. That's the state I frankly acknowledged she had reduced me to. I'd have

been honestly grateful to have done that. But Carla wouldn't let me.

"Out?" she inquired. "But this whole party is for you, darling."

There was nobody about. She didn't have to pretend. She and I knew I was the slave. She and I knew her long-refrigerated soul, returning in fire, had scalded me into a melty on the ground. So it could only be cruelty, this. She seemed to be experimenting, even, as she had with the gadgets. The psychological dissection of an inferior inhabitant of the future.

What I had to do therefore, was to visit the ready-set hair parlour, and buy a dress with my bi-monthly second W-I cheque. Carla, though naturally she didn't go with me, somehow instigated and oversaw these ventures. Choosing the dress, she was oddly at my elbow. *That* one, her detached and omnipresent aura instructed me. It was expensive, and it was scarlet and gold. It would have looked wonderful on somebody else. But not me. That dress just sucked the little life I've got right out of me.

Come the big night (before the big day, for which the countdown must already have, in fact, begun), there I was, done up like a New Year parcel, and with my own problematical soul wizened within me. The door signal went, and the slave accordingly opened the door, and the dark angel entered, politely thanking me as he nearly walked straight through me.

He looked so marvellous, I practically bolted. But still the aura of Carla, and Carla's wishes, which were beginning to seem to be communicating themselves telepathically, held me put.

Then Carla appeared. I hadn't seen her before, that evening. The dress was lionskin, and it looked real, despite the anti-game-hunting laws. Her hair was a smooth auburn waterfall that left bare an ear with a gold star dependent from it. I just went into the cooking area and uncorked a bottle and drank most of it straight off.

They both had good appetites, though hers was better than his. She'd eaten a vast amount since she'd been with me, presumably ravenous after that long fast. I was the waitress, so I waited on them. When I reached my plate, the food had congealed because the warmer in the table on my side was faulty. Anyway, I wasn't hungry. There were two types of wine. I drank the cheap type. I was on the second bottle now, and sufficiently sad I could have howled, but I'd also grown uninvolved, viewing my sadness from a great height.

They danced together to the septophones. I drank some more wine. I was going to be very, very ill tomorrow. But that was tomorrow. Verily. When I looked up, they'd danced themselves into the bedroom and the panels were shut. Carla's cruelty had had its run and I wasn't prepared for any additions, such as ecstatic moans from the interior, to augment my frustration. Accordingly, garbed in my New Year parcel frock, hair in curlicues, and another bottle in my hand, I staggered forth into the night.

I might have met a thug, a rapist, a murderer, or even one of the numerous polipatrols that roam the city to prevent the activities of such. But I didn't meet anyone who took note of me. Nobody cared. Nobody was interested. Nobody wanted to be my friend, rob me, abuse me, give me a job or a goal, or make me happy, or make love to me. So if you thought I was a Judas, just you remember that. If one of you slobs had taken any notice of me that night—

I didn't have to wait for morning to be ill. There was a handsome washroom on Avenue East. I'll never forget it. I was there quite a while.

When the glamourous weather-control dawn irradiated the city, I was past the worst. And by 10 A.M. I was trudging home, queasy, embittered, hard-done-by, but sober. I was even able to register the tabloes everywhere and the holoid neons, telling us all that the great day was here. The day of the four thousand and ninety. Thawday. I wondered dimly if Carla and the Prince of Darkness were still celebrating it in my bed. She should have been cold. Joke. All right. It isn't.

The door to my apartment let me in. The place was as I'd abandoned it. The window-blinds were down, the table strewn with plates and glasses. The bedroom door firmly shut.

I pressed the switch to raise the blinds, and nothing happened, which didn't surprise me. That in itself should have proved to me how far the influence had gone and how there was no retreat. But I only had this random desultory urge to see what the apartment door would do now. What it did was not react. Not even when I put my hand on the panel, which method was generally reserved for guests. It had admitted me, but wouldn't let me out again. Carla had done something to it. As she had to the call, the meters, and to me. But how—personal power? Ridiculous. I was a spineless dope, that was why she'd been able to negate me. Yet—

forty-one medics, with a bevy of tests and questions, some of which, apparently, she hadn't got right, ate from her hand. And maybe her psychic ability had increased. Practice makes perfect.

. . . What befalls a soul trapped for years, centuries, in a living, yet statically frozen body?

It was dark in the room, with the blinds irreversibly staying down and the lights irreversibly off.

Then the bedroom door slid wide, and Carla slid out. Naked again, and glowing in the dark. She smiled at me, pityingly.

"Tacey, darling, now you've gotten over your sulks, there's something in here I'd like you to clear up for me."

Dichotomy once more. I wanted to take root where I was, but she had me walking to the bedroom. She truly was glowing. As if she'd lightly sprayed herself over with something mildly luminous. I guessed what would be in the bedroom, and I'd begun retching, but, already despoiled of filling, that didn't matter. Soon I was in the doorway and she said, "Stop that, Tacey." And I stopped retching and stood and looked at what remained of the beautiful black medic, wrapped up in the bloodstained lionskin.

Lions drink blood, not roses.

Something loosened inside me then. It was probably the final submission, the final surrender of the fight. Presumably I'd been fighting her subconsciously from the start, or I wouldn't have gained the ragged half-freedoms I had. But now I was limp and sodden, so I could ask humbly: "The plant was salad. But a man —what was he?"

"You don't quite get it, darling, do you?" Carla said. She stroked my hair friendlily. I didn't shudder anymore. Cowed dog, I was relaxed under the contemptuous affection of my mistress. "One was green and vegetable. One was black, male, and meat. Different forms. Local dishes. I had no inclination to sample you, you comprehend, since you were approximate to my own appearance. But of course, others who find themselves to be black and male, may wish to sample pale-skinned females. Don't worry, Tacey. You'll be safe. You entertain me. You're mine. Protected species."

"Still don't understand, Carla," I whispered meekly.

"Well, just clear up for me, and I'll explain."

I don't have to apologize to you for what I did then, because, of course, you know all about it, the will-less indifference of the

absolute slave. I bundled up the relics of Carla's lover-breakfast, and dumped them in the waste-disposal, which dealt with them pretty efficiently.

Then I cleaned the bedroom, and had a shower, and fixed Carla some coffee and biscuits. It was almost noon, the hour when the four thousand and ninety were going to be roused, and to step from their frost boxes in front of seven-eighths of the world's Spatial-viewers. Carla wanted to see it too, so I switched on my set, minus the sound. Next Carla told me I might sit, and I sat on a pillow, and she explained.

For some reason, I don't remember her actual words. Perhaps she put it in a technical way and I got the gist but not the sentences. I'll put it in my own words here, despite the fact that a lot of you know now anyway. After all, under supervision, we still have babies sometimes. When they grow up they'll need to know. Know why they haven't got a chance, and why we hadn't. And, to level with you, know why I'm not a Judas, and that I didn't betray us, because I didn't have a chance either.

Laziness, optimism, and blind stupidity.

I suppose optimism more than anything.

Four thousand and ninety-one persons lying down in frozen stasis, aware they didn't have souls and couldn't otherwise survive, dreaming of a future of cures, and of a reawakening in that future. And the earth dreaming of benevolent visitors from other worlds, father-mother figures to guide and help us. Sending them buzz-whuzzes to bleep, over and over, *Here* we are. *Here. Here.*

I guess we do have souls. Or we have something that has nothing to do with the brain, or the nerve centers, or the spinal cord. Perhaps that dies too, when we die. Or perhaps it escapes. Whatever happens, that's the one thing you can't retain in Cryogenic Suspension. The body, all its valves and ducts and organs, lies pristine in limbo, and when you wake it up with the correct drugs, impulses, stimuli, it's live again, can be cured of its diseases, becoming a flawless vessel of—nothing. It's like an empty room, a vacant lot. The tenant's skipped.

Somewhere out in the starry night of space, one of the bleeping buzz-whuzzes was intercepted. Not by pater-mater figures, but by a predatory, bellicose alien race. It was simple to get to us—hadn't we given comprehensive directions? But on arrival they perceived a world totally unsuited to their fiery, gaseous, incor-

poreal forms. That was a blow, that was. But they didn't give up hope. Along with their superior technology they developed a process whereby they reckoned they could transfer inside of human bodies, and thereafter live off the fat of the Terrain. However, said process wouldn't work. Why not? The human consciousness (soul?) was too strong to overcome, it wouldn't let them through. Even asleep, they couldn't oust us. Dormant, the consciousness (soul?) is still present, or at least linked. As for dead bodies, no go. A man who had expired of old age, or with a mobile on top of him was no use. The body had to be a whole one, or there was no point. Up in their saucers, which were periodically spotted, they spat and swore. They gazed at the earth and drooled, pondering mastery of a globe, and entire races of slaves at their disposal. But there was no way they could achieve their aims until—until they learned of all those Cryogenic Suspensions in their frost boxes, all those soulless lumps of ice, waiting on the day when science would release and cure them and bring them forth healthy and *void*.

If you haven't got a tenant, advertize for a new tenant. We had. And they'd come.

Carla was the first. As her eyes opened under the crystal, something looked out of them. Not Carla Brice. Not anymore. But something.

Curious, cruel, powerful, indomitable, alien, deadly.

Alone, she could handle hundreds of us humans, for her influence ascended virtually minute by minute. Soon there were going to be four thousand and ninety of her kind, opening their eyes, smiling their scornful thank-yous through the Spatials at the world they had come to conquer. The world they did conquer.

We gave them beautiful, healthy, moveable houses to live in, and billions to serve them and be toyed with by them, and provide them with extra bodies to be frozen and made fit to house any leftover colleagues of theirs. And our green depolluted meadows wherein to rejoice.

As for Carla, she'd kept quiet and careful as long as she had to. Long enough for the tests to go through and for her to communicate back, telepathically, to her people, all the data they might require on earth, prior to their arrival.

And now she sat and considered me, meteoric fiery Carla-who-wasn't-Carla, her eyes, in the dark, gleaming topaz yellow

through their copper irises, revealing her basic inflammable nature within the veil of a dead woman's living flesh.

They can make me do whatever they want, and they made me write this. Nothing utterly bad has been done to me, and maybe it never will. So I've been lucky there.

To them, I'm historically interesting, as Carla had been historically interesting to us, as a first. I'm the first Slave. Possibly, I can stay alive on the strength of that and not be killed for a whim.

Which, in a way, I suppose, means I'm a sort of a success, after all.

OUT THERE WHERE THE BIG SHIPS GO

by Richard Cowper

Though from its title this sounds like an interstellar epic, it is not. This is a different evaluation of the possible future of humanity after encounter with other species and non-Terrestrially derived cultures. It takes place on Earth in a time not very remote from the present. It may be a sort of utopian era, though that is not precisely stated; still this unusual British writer projects a preoccupation for the restless human mind that may signify a coming epoch of contemplative peace. Zen, anyone?

It was at breakfast on the second day that Roger first noticed the grey-haired man with the beard. He was sitting at the far corner table, partly shadowed by the filmy swag of the gathered gauze curtain. It was the ideal vantage point from which to observe whatever might be going on outside the long vista-window or to survey the guests as they came into the hotel dining room. But the bearded man was doing neither. He was just sitting, staring straight ahead of him, as though he could see right through the partition wall which divided the dining room from the hotel bar, and on out across the town and the azure bay to where the

giant clippers unfurled their glittering metal sails and reached up to grasp the Northeast Trades.

"Don't stare, Roger. It's rude."

The boy flushed and made a play of unfolding his napkin and arranging it on his lap. "I wasn't staring," he muttered. "Just looking."

A young waiter with a sickle-shaped scar above his left eyebrow moved across from the buffet and stood deferentially at the shoulder of Roger's mother. He winked down at Roger, who smiled back at him shyly.

"You go on cruise today maybe, Senor? See *Los dedos de Dios,* hey?"

Roger shook his head.

Mrs. Herzheim looked up from the menu. "Is the fish real *fresh?"*

"Si, they bring him in this morning."

"We'll have that then. And grapefruits for starters. And coffee."

"Si, Senora." The young waiter flapped his napkin at Roger, winked again and hurried away.

Mrs. Herzheim tilted her head to one side and made a minuscule adjustment to one of her pearl eardrops. "What're your plans, honey?" she enquired lazily.

"I don't know, Mom. I thought maybe I'd—"

"Yoo-hoo, Susie! Over here!"

"Hi, Babs. Hi, Roger. Have you ordered, hon?"

"Yeah. We're having the fish. Where's Harry?"

"Collecting his paper."

The dining room was beginning to fill up, the waiters scurrying back and forth with laden trays, the air redolent with the aroma of fresh coffee and hot bread rolls. A slim girl with a lemon-yellow cardigan draped across her shoulders came in from the bar entrance. She was wearing tinted glasses, and her glossy, shoulder-length hair was the color of a freshly husked chestnut. She passed behind Roger's chair, threading her way among the tables until she had reached the corner where the bearded man was sitting. She pulled out a chair and sat down beside him so that her profile was towards the other guests and she was directly facing the window.

Roger watched the pair covertly. He saw the man lean forward

and murmur something to the girl. She nodded. He then raised a finger, beckoned, and as though he had been hovering in readiness just for this, a waiter hurried over to their table. While they were giving their breakfast order, Roger's waiter reappeared with the grapefruits, a pot of coffee and a basket of rolls. As he was distributing them about the table, Susie Fogel signed to him.

He bent towards her attentively.

She twitched her snub nose in the direction of the corner table. "Is that who I think it is?" she murmured.

The waiter glanced swiftly round. "At the corner table? *Si,* Senora, that is him."

"Ah," Susie let out her breath in a quiet sigh.

"When did he arrive?"

"Late last night, Senora."

The waiter took her order and retreated in the direction of the kitchens. Mrs. Herzheim poured out a cup of coffee and handed it to Roger. As he was reaching for it, Harry Fogel appeared. He wished Roger and his mother a genial good morning and took the seat opposite his wife.

Susie lost no time in passing on her news.

Harry turned his head and scanned the couple in the corner. "Well, well," he said. "That must mean Guilio's around too. How's *that* for a turn-up?"

Roger said, "Who is he, Mr. Fogel?"

Harry Fogel's round face transformed itself into a parody of wide-eyed incredulity. *"Oi vai,"* he sighed. "Don't they teach you kids *any* history these days?"

Roger flushed and buried his nose in his grapefruit.

"Aw, come on, son," protested Harry. "Help an old man to preserve his illusions. Sure even a twelve-year-old's heard of *The Icarus?"*

Roger nodded, acutely conscious that his ears were burning.

"Well, there you are then. That's Mr. Icarus in person. The one and only. Come to add luster to our little tourney. Very big deal, eh, Babs?"

Roger's mother nodded, reached out for the sugar bowl and sprinkled more calories than she could reasonably afford over her grapefruit.

Roger risked another glance at the corner table. To his acute consternation the bearded man now appeared to be gazing

directly across at him. For a moment their eyes met, and then, in the very act of glancing away, Roger thought he saw the old man lower his left eyelid ever so slightly.

At ten o'clock, Roger accompanied his mother to the youth salon. It was a trip he had been making in innumerable resorts for almost as long as he could remember. Hitherto, it had not occurred to him to resent it any more than it would have occurred to the poodles and chihuahuas to resent their diamante studded leashes. Had anyone thought to ask him, he would probably have admitted that he genuinely enjoyed the warm, familiar femininity of the salons with their quiet carpets, their scents of aromatic waxes and lacquers, their whispered confessions which came creeping into his ears like exotic tendrils from beneath the anonymous helmets of the driers while, mouselike and unobserved, he turned the pages of the picture magazines. But today, when they reached the portico of the salon he suddenly announced: "I think I'll go on down to the harbor and take a look at the clippers, Mom."

Mrs. Herzheim frowned doubtfully. "All on your *own,* honey? Are you *sure?* I mean it's—well. . . ."

Roger smiled. "I'll be fine. You don't have to worry about me."

"But we can go together this afternoon," she countered. "I'm looking forward to seeing those clippers too, honey."

Roger's smile remained inflexible, and suddenly it dawned upon his mother that the only way she would get him inside that salon would be to drag him in by main force. The realization shocked her profoundly. She gnawed at her bottom lip as she eyed askance her twelve-year-old son, who had chosen this moment to challenge, gently, her absolute authority over him. She consulted her Cartier wristwatch and sighed audibly. "Well, all right then," she conceded. "But you're to be right back here on this very spot at noon sharp. You hear that? Promise me, now."

Roger nodded. "Sure, Mom."

Mrs. Herzheim unclipped her handbag, took out a currency bill and passed it over. Roger folded it carefully, unzipped the money pouch on his belt and stuffed the note inside. "Thanks," he said.

They stood for a moment, eying each other thoughtfully; then Mrs. Herzheim leant forward and kissed him lightly on the forehead. "You're going to tell me all about it over lunch," she said. "I'm counting on it."

Roger grinned and nodded as he watched her turn and vanish through the swing doors of the salon; then he too turned lightly on his heel and began skipping down the cobbled street towards the harbor. After a few seconds he broke into a trot which gradually accelerated into a sort of wild, leaping dance which lasted until he hurtled out, breathless, through the shadow of an ancient arched gateway and found himself on the quayside.

He clutched at a stone stanchion while he got his breath back. Then he blinked his eyes and looked about him. The sunshine striking off the ripples was flinging a shifting web of light across the hulls of the fishing boats. The very air seemed to swirl like the seabirds as they circled and swooped and dived for floating fragments of fishgut. Dark-eyed women in gaudy shawls, brass combs winking in their black hair, shouted to one another across the water from the ornate iron balconies of the waterside tenements. Donkey carts rattle up and down the slabbed causeway. Huge swarthy men, sheathed in leather aprons, their bare arms ashimmer with fish scales, trotted past crowned with swaying pagodas of baskets and flashed white teeth at him in gleaming grins. A posse of mongrels queued up to cock their legs against a shell-fish stall only to scatter, yelping, as the outraged owner swore and hurled an empty box at them. Roger laughed, relinquished his stanchion, and began dodging among the fishermen and the sightseers, heading past the dim and echoing warehouses towards the light tower on the inner harbor mole.

When he reached his goal he sat down and drew a deep breath of pure delight. On a rock ledge some ten meters beneath him, two boys of about his own age were fishing. He watched them for a moment, then raised his eyes and looked up at the dark volcanic hills. He noted the scattering of solar "sunflower" generators; the distant globe of the observatory; the tumbling, trade-driven clouds; the lime-washed houses clambering on each other's shoulders up the steep hillside; the great hotels squatting smugly high above. By screwing up his eyes he just managed to make out in one of them the shuttered windows of the rooms which, for the next fortnight, were to be his and his mother's.

Suddenly, for no particular reason, he found himself remembering the old man and the girl with auburn hair. He tried to recall what he had read about *The Icarus,* but apart from the fact that she had been the last of the starships, he could not recall

very much. As Mr. Fogel had said, that was history, and history had never been his favorite subject. But there was something about that grey-haired, bearded man which would not let his mind alone. And suddenly he knew what it was! "He just wasn't *seeing* us," he said aloud. "He didn't *care!*"

Hearing his voice, the two boys below glanced up. *"Cigarillo, Senor?"* one called hopefully.

Roger smiled and shook his head apologetically.

The boys looked at one another, laughed, shouted something he could not understand, and returned to their fishing.

Far out to sea, sunlight twinkled from the dipping topsails of an eight-masted clipper. Roger thrust out his little finger at the full stretch of his arm and tried to estimate her speed, counting silently to mark off the seconds it took her to flicker out of his sight and back again. Twenty-four. And an eight-master meant at least 200 meters overall. Two hundred in twenty-four seconds would be one hundred in twelve would be . . . five hundred in a minute. Multiply 500 by 60 and you got . . . 30 kilometers an hour. Just about average for the Northeast Trade route. But, even so, six days from now she would be rounding Barbados and sniffing for the Gulf. Very quietly he began to hum the theme of *Trade Winds,* the universal hit of a year or two back, following the great ship with his dreaming eyes as she dipped and soared over the distant swells and vowing that one day he too would be in command of such a vessel, plunging silver-winged along the immemorial trade routes of the world.

He sat gazing out to sea long after the great ship had slipped down out of sight below the horizon. Then with a sigh he climbed to his feet and began making his way back along the harbor, dimly conscious that some part of him was still out there on the ocean but not yet sufficiently self-aware to know which part it was.

A clock in a church tower halfway up the hillside sent its noonday chimes fluttering out over the roofs of the town like a flock of silver birds. Roger suddenly remembered his promise to his mother and broke into a run.

Mrs. Herzheim discovered that the youth salon had given her a headache. So after lunch she retired to her bedroom leaving Roger to spend the afternoon by the hotel pool. He had it to him-

self; most of the other guests having opted for one or another of the organized excursions to the local beauty spots, or, like Roger's mother, chosen to rest up prior to the ardors of the night's session.

Roger swam the eight lengths he had set himself, then climbed out and padded across to the loafer where he had left his towel and his micomicon. Who was it to be? He sat down, gave a cursory scrub to his wet hair, then flipped open the back of the cabinet and ran his eye down the familiar index. Nelson, Camelot, Kennedy, Pasteur, Alan Quartermain, Huck Finn, Tarzan, Frodo, Titus Groan—his finger hovered and a voice seemed to whisper deep inside his head *each flint a cold blue stanza of delight, each feather, terrible.* . . . He shivered and was on the point of uncoiling the agate earplugs when he heard a splash behind him. He glanced round in time to see the head of the girl who had shared the old man's breakfast table emerging from the water. A slim brown hand came up, palmed the wet hair from her eyes; then she turned over on her back and began threshing the water to a glittering froth, forging down the length of the pool towards him.

Five meters out, she stopped kicking and came gliding in to the edge under her own impetus. She reached up, caught hold of the tiled trough, and turned over. Her head and the tops of her shoulders appeared above the rim of the pool. She regarded Roger thoughtfully for a moment then smiled. "Hello there."

"Hi," said Roger.

"Not exactly crowded, is it?"

"They're all out on excursions," he said, noting that she had violet eyes. "Or taking a siesta."

"All except us."

"Yes," he said. "Except us."

"What's your name?"

"Roger Herzheim."

"Mine's Anne. Anne Henderson."

"I saw you at breakfast this morning," he said. "You were with. . . ."

She wrinkled her nose like a rabbit. "My husband. We saw you too."

Roger glanced swiftly round. "Is—is he coming for a swim too?"

"Pete? No, he's up at the observatory."

Roger nodded. "Are you here on holiday?"

She flicked him a quick, appraising glance. "Well, sort of. And you?"

"Mom's playing in the tourney. She's partnering Mr. Fogel."

"And what do *you* do, Roger?"

"Oh, I come along for the trips. In the vacations, that is."

"Don't you get bored?"

"Bored?" he repeated. "No."

The girl paddled herself along to the steps and climbed out. She was wearing a minute token costume of gold beeswing, and the sunlight seemed to drip from her. She skipped across and squatted down beside him. "May I see?" she asked, pointing to the micomicon.

"Sure," said Roger amicably. "I guess they'll seem a pretty old-fashioned bunch to you."

She peered at the spool index and suddenly said, "Hey! You've got one of mine there!"

"Yours?"

"Sure. I played Lady Fuchsia in *Titus* for Universal."

Roger stared at her with the sort of absorbed attention a connoisseur might have given to a rare piece of Dresden. "You," he repeated tonelessly. "You're Lady Fuchsia?"

"I *was,*" she laughed. "For nine solid months. Seven years ago. It was my first big part. Gail Ferguson. You'll find me among the credits."

"I wiped those off," he said. "I always do."

She glanced up at him sideways. "How old are you, Roger?"

"Twelve and a half."

"You like *Titus,* do you?"

"It's my favorite. Easily."

"And Fuchsia?"

He looked away from her out to where the distant aluminized dishes of the solar generators, having turned past the zenith, were now tracking the sun downhill towards the west. "I wish . . ." he murmured and then stopped.

"What do you wish?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Go on. You can tell me."

He turned his head and looked at her again. "I don't know how

to say it," he muttered awkwardly. "Not without seeming rude, I mean."

Her smile dimmed a little. "Oh, go on," she said. "I can take it."

"Well, I just wish you hadn't told me, that's all. About you being Fuchsia, I mean."

"Ah," she said and nodded. There was a long pause, then: "You know, Roger, I think that's about the nicest compliment anyone's ever paid me."

Roger blinked. "Compliment?" he repeated. "Really?"

"Really. You're saying I made Fuchsia come alive for you. Isn't that it?"

He nodded. "I guess so."

"Here. Close your eyes a minute," she said. "Listen." Her voice changed, not a lot, but enough, became a little dry and husky. *Sunflower,* she murmured sadly, *Sunflower who's broken, I found you, so drink some water up, and then you won't die—not so quickly anyway. If you do I'll bury you anyway. I'll dig a long grave and bury you. Pentecost will give me a spade. If you don't die you can stay. . . .*

She watched his face closely. "There," she said, in her own voice. "You see? Fuchsia exists in me and apart from me: in you and apart from you. Outside of time. She won't grow older like the rest of us."

Roger opened his eyes. "You speak about her as if she was real," he said wonderingly.

"Real!" There was a sudden, surprising bitterness in the girl's voice. "I don't know what the word means. Do you?"

"Why, yes," he said, puzzled by the change in her tone. "You're real. So am I. And this"—he waved a hand towards the pool and the hotel—"that's real."

"What makes you so sure?"

He suspected that she was laughing at him. "Well, because I can touch it," he said.

"And that makes it real?"

"Sure."

She lifted her arm and held it out to him. "Touch me, Roger."

He grinned and laid his right hand lightly on the sun-warmed flesh of her forearm. "You're real, all right."

"That's very reassuring," she said. "No, I mean it. Some days I don't feel real at all." She laughed. "I should have you around more often, shouldn't I?"

She stood up, walked to the edge of the pool, flexed her coral-tipped toes and plunged in, neatly and without fuss.

Roger watched her slender body flickering, liquid and golden against the tiled floor. Then he snapped shut the micomicon, sprinted across the paved surround, and dived to join her.

The tourney was due to start at eight o'clock. Mrs. Herzheim was all a-flutter because she had just learnt that she and Harry Fogel were drawn against the co-favorites in her section for the first round. "Do you think it's a good omen, Roger?" she asked. "Be honest now."

"Sure, Mom. A block conversion at the very least."

"Wouldn't that be marvelous? Certain sure Harry would muff it though. Like that time in Reykjavik, remember? I could've *died!*" She leant close to the dressing table mirror and caressed her eyelashes with her mascara brush. "You going to watch So-Vi, honey?"

"I expect so."

Mrs. Herzheim eyed her reflection critically and then sighed. "That's the best you'll do, girl. Can't turn mutton into lamb. How do I look, baby?"

"You look great."

"That's my pet." She restored the mascara brush to its holder and zipped up her toilet case. "Well, all you can do for me now is to wish me luck, honey."

"Good luck, Mom."

She walked over to the bed where her son was lying, bent over and kissed him, but lightly so as to avoid smearing her lips. "I'll mouse in so's not to wake you," she said.

He smiled and nodded and she went out, wafting him a final fingertip kiss from the doorway.

Roger lay there for a few minutes, his fingers laced behind his head, and gazed up at the ceiling. Then he got up from his mother's bed and walked through into his own room. From the drawer of the bedside cabinet he took out his recorder, ran it back for a while and listened to the letter to his father which he had started taping the previous evening. He added a description

of his visit to the harbor and was about to move on to his meeting with Anne Henderson when he suddenly changed his mind. He switched off the recorder, went back into his mother's room and retrieved his micomicon. Having slotted home the *Titus* cartridge, he uncoiled the earphones and screwed the plugs into his ears. Then he lay on the bed, reached down, pushed the button which activated the mechanism, and, finally, dragged the goggles down over his eyes.

At once the familiar magic began to work. The wraiths of milk-white mist parted on either side; gnarled specters of ancient trees emerged and lolloped past to the slow pacing of his horse; he heard the bridle jingle and the whispering waterdrops pattering down upon the drifts of dead and decaying leaves. At any moment now he would emerge upon the escarpment and, gazing down, behold by the sickly light of a racing moon, the enormous crouching beast of stone that was the castle of Gormenghast. Then, swooping like some huge and silent night bird down over the airy emptiness and up again towards the tiny pinprick of light high up in the ivied bastion wall, he would gaze in through the latticed, candlelit window of Fuchsia's room. He heard the telltale rattle of the pebble dislodged, and the mist veils thinned abruptly to a filmy gauze. He had reached the forest's edge. His horse moved forward one more hesitant pace and stood still, awaiting his command. He leant forward and was about to peer down into The Valley That Never Was when the vision dimmed abruptly and, a second later, had flickered into total darkness.

Roger swore, dragged off the goggles and hoisted the machine up from the floor beside the bed. The ruby telltale was glowing like a wind-fanned spark. He pushed the OFF button, and the light vanished. He stared glumly at the all-but-invisible thread, then activated the rewind mechanism and plucked the slender cartridge from its slot. Perhaps he would be able to find a repair depot in the town somewhere. It did not seem likely. He unfastened the earplugs, restored them to their foam-molded cache beside the goggles and closed up the inspection panel. Then he let himself out into the corridor and rode the elevator down to the reception hall.

His spirits revived a little when the desk clerk informed him that there was indeed a Universal Elektronix shop in the town. He added regretfully that, so far as he knew, it ran no all-night

service. Roger thanked him and was about to head for the So-Vi lounge when an impulse persuaded him to change his mind and he walked out on to the terrace instead.

The sun had set a quarter of an hour past, but the western horizon was still faintly fringed with a pale violet glow that deepened precipitately to indigo. Directly overhead, the equatorial stars were trembling like raindrops on the twigs of an invisible tree. Roger walked slowly to the edge of the pool and gazed down at the quivering reflections of unfamiliar constellations. The air was soft and warm, balmy with the scent of spice blossom. From somewhere on the dark hillside below him he could hear the sound of a guitar playing and a girl's voice singing. He listened, entranced, and suddenly, unaccountably, he was struggling in the grip of an overwhelming sadness, an emotion all the more poignant because he could ascribe it to no specific cause. He felt the unaccustomed pricking of tears behind his eyelids and he stumbled away towards the dark sanctuary of the parapet which divided the pool area from the steeply terraced flower gardens.

There was a flight of steps, carpeted with some small creeping plant, which he remembered led down to a stone bench where earlier he had seen a small green lizard sunning itself. He scuttled down into the comforting shadows, skirted a jasmine bush and, with eyes not yet fully adjusted to the deeper darkness, felt his cautious way forward. The bench was occupied.

The shock of this discovery froze the sob in his throat. His heart gave a great painful leap and he stared, open-mouthed, at the suddenly glowing end of a cigar. There was a faint chuckle from the shadows, and a deep voice said, "Well, hello there. Roger, isn't it?"

Roger swallowed. "I'm sorry, sir," he gulped. "I didn't know. . . ."

"Sure you didn't. Why should you? So help yourself to a seat, son. And mind the bottle."

Roger hesitated for a moment, then edged carefully forward and sat down on the very far end of the bench.

"Saw you at breakfast, didn't I?" said the voice, and added, parenthetically: "The name's Henderson, by the way."

"Yes, sir," said Roger. "I know. You're The Master."

"Ah," said the voice thoughtfully. There was a long pause,

then: "So, tell me, what brings you out roaming in the gloaming?"

Roger said nothing.

"Me, I come to look at the stars," said the old man. "That sound crazy to you?"

"No, sir."

The cigar flower bloomed bright scarlet and slowly faded. "Well, it does to a lot of people," said the deep voice, once more disembodied.

"Not to me," said Roger, surprised to hear how firm his own voice sounded.

There was a clink of glass against glass, followed by a brisk gurgle. "Care for a mouthful of wine?"

"No, thank you, sir."

There was a moment of silence and then the sound of a glass being set down again. "I gather you met Anne this afternoon."

"Yes, sir."

"You like her?"

"Yes, sir," Roger affirmed fervently.

"Beautiful, isn't she?"

Roger said nothing, partly because he could think of nothing to say, partly because he had just realized that his recollection of touching Anne's sun-warmed arm had been a primal cause of his sudden loneliness.

"Well, she is," said The Master. "And let me assure you, Roger, I know what I'm talking about."

"Yes, she's lovely," murmured Roger, and wondered where she was now.

"Beauty isn't just *shape*, boy. It's spirit too. A sweet harmony. Did you know that?"

"I—I'm not sure I know what you mean, sir."

"Well, take The Game. What grade are you, Roger?"

"Thirty-second Junior, sir."

"Ever make a clear center star?"

"I did nearly. About a year ago."

"How'd it feel?"

"I don't really know, sir. It just sort of happened. I wasn't even thinking about it."

"Of course not. It's a sort of natural flow. You lose yourself in it. That's the secret of The Game, boy. Losing yourself." The

cigar tip described a rosy, fragrant arabesque in the air and ended up pointing toward the heavens. "Out there beyond Eridanus. That's where I found that out. Might just as well have stayed at home, hey?" Again the glass clinked. "How old are you, son?"

Roger told him.

"Know how old I am?"

"No, sir."

"Take a guess."

Roger groped. "Sixty."

The Master gave a brusque snort of laughter and said, "Well, I'm surely flattered to hear you say so, Roger. Tell me, do the names Armstrong and Aldrin mean anything to you?"

"No, sir."

The Master sighed. "And why should they, indeed? But when I was your age, they were just about the two most famous names on this whole planet. '68 that was—the year all the kids in our neighborhood grew ten feet tall overnight!" He gave another little mirthless snort. "We were the ones who bought the dream, Roger, the whole goddamn, star-dream package, lock, stock and barrel. And in the end one or two of us even got there. The chosen few. Hand-picked. Know what they called us? Knights of the Grail!" He spat out into the darkness, and a moment later the tiny furnace of the cigar glowed bright and angry as he dragged hard at the invisible teat.

"Like Sir Lancelot and Sir Gawain?" suggested Roger timidly.

"Maybe," said The Master. "All I know is they told us we'd been privileged to live out man's eternal dream on his behalf. And we believed them! Thirty-nine years old I was, boy, and I still swallowed that sort of crud! Can you credit it?"

Some small creature rustled dryly in the jasmine bush and was silent again. Down below in the scarf of shadow that lay draped across the shoulder of the hill between the hotel and the twinkling lights of the town, the sound of the girl's voice came again, singing sweetly and sadly to the accompaniment of the plucked strings.

Roger said, "What was it *really* like out there, sir?"

There was a pause so long that Roger was beginning to wonder whether the old man had heard his question, then: "There comes a moment, boy, when for the life of you you can't pick out the sun from all the rest of them. That's when the thread snaps and you slip right through the fingers of God. There's nothing left for

you to relate to. But if you've been well-trained, or you're as thick as two planks, or maybe just plain lucky, you come through that and out on the other side. But something's happened to you. You don't know what's *real* anymore. You get to wondering about the nature of Time and how old you *really* are. You question everything. But *everything*. And in the end, if you're like me, the dime finally drops and you realize you've been conned. And And that's the second moment of truth."

"Conned?"

"That's right, son. Conned. Cheated. Hood-winked. Look." He took the cigar from between his lips and blew upon the smoldering cone of ash until it glowed bright red. "Now what color would you say that was?"

"Why, red, of course."

"No. I'm telling you you're wrong. That's blue. Bright blue."

"Not *really,*" said Roger.

"Yes, really," said The Master. "You only say it's red because you've been told that's what red is. For you blue is something else again. But get enough people to say that's blue, and it *is* blue. Right?"

"But it's still red, really," said Roger, and gave a nervous little hiccup of laughter.

"It's what it is," said The Master somberly. "Not what anyone *says* it is. That's what I discovered out there. Sometimes I think it's all I did discover."

Roger shifted uneasily on the stone bench. "But you said. . . ." He began and then hesitated. "I mean when you said before about spirit . . . about its being beautiful. . . ."

"That too," admitted The Master. "But it's the same thing."

Was it? Roger had no means of knowing.

"Spirit's just another way of saying 'quality'—something everyone recognizes and no one's ever defined. You can recognize quality, can't you, Roger?"

"I—I'm not sure, sir."

"Sure you're sure. You recognized it in Anne, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes."

"I suspect it's what you were out looking for down by the harbor this morning. It's what brought you out here tonight when you could have been sitting there snug and pie-eyed in front of the So-Vi with all the rest of the morons."

"My micomicon broke," said Roger truthfully.

The Master chuckled. "You win, son," he said.

"Did you know that Anne was Lady Fuchsia in *Titus Groan?*"

"She was?"

"Yes. She told me this afternoon. I was going to see if it seemed any different now I know."

"Ah," said The Master. "And was it?"

"I don't know. The spool broke before I got to her."

"That's life, son," said The Master, and again gave vent to one of his explosive snorts of laughter. "Just one long series of broken spools. You're here for the tourney, are you?"

"Mom is."

"And your father?"

"He's in Europe—Brussels. He's a World Commodity Surveyor. He and mom are separated."

"Ah." The sound was a verbal nod of understanding.

"I get to go on vacation with him twice a year. We have some great times together. He gave me the micomicon. He's fixing a clipper trip for us next spring."

"You're looking forward to that, are you?"

Roger sighed ecstatically, seeing yet again in his mind's eye the silver-winged sea-bird dipping and soaring over the tumbling, trade-piled Atlantic hills, wreathed in spraybows.

"You like the sea?"

"More than anything," avowed Roger. "One day I'm going to be master of my own clipper."

The cigar glowed and a pennant of aromatic smoke wavered hesitantly in the vague direction of far-off Eridanus. "That's your ambition, is it?"

"Yes, sir," said Roger simply.

"And how about The Game?"

Before Roger could come up with an answer, a voice called down from the terrace above them: "Hey! Isn't it time you were getting robed-up, Pete?"

"I guess it must be, if you say so," responded The Master.

"Guilio's in the hall already. Who's that down there with you?"

"A fan of yours, I gather."

"Roger?"

"Hello," said Roger.

With a faint groan The Master rose from the bench, dropped his cigar butt on the stone-slabbed parterre and screwed it out

beneath the sole of his shoe. Then he picked up his glass and the almost empty wine bottle. With eyes now fully accustomed to the gloom, Roger saw that the old man was bowing gravely towards him. "I must beg you to excuse me, Roger," he said, "but as you will have realized, duty calls. I have greatly enjoyed our conversation. We shall meet again. Perhaps tomorrow, heh?"

"Thank you, sir. Good luck."

"Luck?" The Master appeared to consider the implications of the courtesy for a moment. He smiled. "It's a long, long time since anybody wished me that, Roger. But thank you, nonetheless."

Mercifully the darkness hid the bright flush of mortification on the boy's cheeks.

The Master and his challenger, Guilio Romano Amato, sat facing each other on a raised dais at one end of the tourney hall, separated from the other players by a wide swath of crimson carpet and the token barrier of a thick, guilded cord. On the wall above their heads a huge electronic scoreboard replicated the moves in this, the third session of the Thirty-Third World Kalire Championship.

Besides the two contestants seven other people shared the dais: the Supreme Arbitrator, The Master's two Seconds, Amato's Seconds, and the two Official Scorekeepers, one of whom was Anne. They all sat cross-legged on cushions at a discreet distance from the two principals. If they were conscious that their every movement, every facial expression, was being relayed by satellite to a million Kalire temples around the world, they evidenced no sign of it. They dwelt apart, isolated, enthralled by the timeless mystery and wonder of The Game of Games, the Gift from Beyond the Stars.

Into those silent, fathomless, interstellar reaches, the mere contemplation of which had once so terrified Pascal, Man in the person of The Master had dared to dip his arm. Two full centuries later, long after he had been given up for dead, he had returned to Earth, bearing with him the inconceivable Grail he had gone to seek.

He had emerged to find a world exhausted and ravaged almost beyond his recognition—a world in which the fabulous mission of *The Icarus* had dwindled to little more than an uneasy folk mem-

ory of what was surely the purest and most grandiloquent of all the acts of folly ever perpetrated in the whole crazy history of the human race.

When the great starship, scorched and scarred from its fantastic odyssey, had finally dropped flaming out of the skies to settle as gently as a seed of thistledown upon its original launching site on the shore of Lake Okeechobee, few who witnessed its arrival could bring themselves wholly to believe the evidence that was so manifestly there before them. The huge, tarnished, silver pillar standing there among the rusting debris and the crumbling gantries whispered to them of those days, long since past, when their forefathers still had the capacity to hope.

A hastily convened reception committee had driven out to welcome the wanderers home. Grouped in a self-conscious semicircle on the fissured and weed-ribbed concrete of the ancient launch pad, the delegation stood waiting for the port to open and the Argonauts to descend.

At last the moment came. The hatch inched open, slowly cranking itself back to reveal a solitary figure standing framed in the portal and gazing down upon them.

"Who is it?" They whispered to one another. "Dalgleish? Martin? No, I'll swear that's Henderson himself. God, he hardly looks a day older than the pictures, does he? Are you *sure* it's him? Yeah, that's Henderson all right. Christ, it doesn't seem possible, does it?"

And then someone had started to clap. In a moment everyone had joined in, beating the palms of their hands together in the dry, indifferent air.

Thirty feet above them, Peter Henderson, Commander of *The Icarus,* heard the strange, uncoordinated pattering of their applause and slowly raised his left hand in hesitant acknowledgement. It was then that some sharp-eyed observer noted that beneath his right arm he was carrying what appeared to be an oblong wooden box.

At first practically nobody took Henderson seriously, and who could blame them? Yet the memory banks of *The Icarus* appeared to confirm much of what he said. The gist of it was that out there, beyond Eridanus, on a planet they had called "Dectire III," they had finally discovered that which they had gone forth to

seek. The form it took was that of a fabulous city which they called "Eidothea," a city which, if Henderson was to be believed, was nothing less than all things to all men. It was inhabited by a race of gentle, doe-eyed creatures who differed from themselves only in being androgynous and in possessing an extra finger upon each hand. They were also, by human standards, practically immortal. The Eidotheans were the professed devotees of an hermaphrodite deity they called Kalirinos, who, they maintained, held sway over one half of the existing universe. The other half was the ordained territory of her counterpart (some said her identical twin) Arimanos. Kalirinos and Arimanos were locked in an eternal game of Kalire (The Game) whose counters were nothing less than the galaxies, the stars and the planets of the entire cosmos. By reaching Eidothea, humanity, in the persons of the crew of *The Icarus,* had supplied the evidence that their species was ready to join The Game and, by so doing, to take another step up the evolutionary ladder.

There had followed a period of roughly six months devoted to their initiation and instruction in the rudiments of Kalire, at the end of which Henderson alone had gained admission to the very lowest Eidothean rank of proficiency in The Game—a grade approximately equivalent by our own standards to the First Year Primary Division. After his victory he had been summoned before the High Council, presented with his robe of initiation, with the board marked out in the one hundred and forty-four squares, each of which has its own name and ideogram, and with the box containing the one hundred and forty-three sacred counters, colored red on one side and blue on the other, which alone constitute the pure notes from which the divine harmonies of The Game of Games are derived. "And now you shall return to your own world," they had told him, "and become the teacher of your people. Soon, if we have judged correctly, your world will be ready to take its place in the timeless federation, and Kalirinos will smile upon you."

Henderson had protested passionately that he was wholly unworthy of such an honor, but the truth was that he could not bear the thought of having to tear himself away from the exquisite delights of Kalire, which, like those of the fabled lotus, once they have been enjoyed, must claim the soul forever. However, the Eidotheans had seemingly been prepared for this. The com-

mander was placed in a mild hypnotic trance, carried aboard *The Icarus,* and the ship's robot brain was instructed to ferry him back to his own planet. The rest of the crew were graciously permitted to remain behind in Paradise.

Within the terms of the eternal symbolic struggle between Kalirinos and Arimanos (and certainly against all the odds), the conversion of the Earth was accomplished with a swiftness roughly commensurate to the reversal of a single counter upon the Divine Board. Within twenty-four hours of his setting foot once more upon his native soil, Commander Henderson had been interviewed upon International So-Vi. There, before the astonished eyes of about a billion skeptical viewers, he had unfolded his board, set down his four opening counters in the prescribed pattern, and had given an incredulous world its very first lesson in Kalire.

The Japanese, with their long tradition of Zen and Go, were the first to become enmeshed in the infinite subtleties of The Game, and within a matter of weeks the great toy factories of Kobe and Nagoya were churning out Kalire sets by the million. The Russians and Chinese were quick to follow. And then—almost overnight it seemed—the whole world had gone Kalire-crazy. It leapt across all barriers of language and politics, demanding nothing, offering everything. Before it armies were powerless, creeds useless. Time-hallowed mercenary values, ancient prejudices, long-entrenched attitudes of mind—all these were suddenly revealed as the insubstantial shadows of a childhood nightmare. Kalire was all. But was it a religion, or a philosophy, or just a perpetual diversion? The answer surely is that it was all these things and more besides. The deeper one studied it, the more subtle and complex it became. Layer upon layer upon layer of revelation awaited the devotee, and yet there was always the knowledge that however profoundly he delved he would never uncover the ultimate penetralia of the mystery.

Soon international tourneys were being organized, and the champions started to emerge. They too competed among themselves for the honor of challenging Peter Henderson. The first contender so to arise was the Go Master, Subi Katumo. He played six games with Henderson and lost them all. From that point on Henderson was known simply as "The Master." He traveled the world over playing exhibition games and giving lectures

to rapt audiences. He also founded the Kalirinos Academy at Pasadena, where he instructed his disciples in those fundamental spiritual disciplines so vital to the mastery of the art of Kalire and into which he himself had been initiated by the Eidotheans. He wrote a book which he called *The Game of Games* and prefaced it with a quotation taken from "The Paradoxes of the Negative Way" by St. John of the Cross—

In order to become that which thou are not,
Thou must go by a way which thou knowest not. . . .

The Game of Games became a world best-seller even before it had reached the bookshops, and within six months of publication had been translated into every language spoken on Earth.

And so Henderson grew old. Now, in the thirty-fourth year of his return, at the physical age of seventy-eight, he was defending his title yet again. His challenger, Guilio Amato, the twenty-eight-year-old Neapolitan, was the premier graduate from the Kalirinos Academy. In his pupil's play The Master had detected for the first time a hint of that ineffable inner luminosity which others ascribe to genius but which he himself recognized as supreme quality. Having recognized it, he dared to permit himself the luxury of hoping that his long vigil might at last be drawing to its close.

So far, they had played two games of the ordained six: one in Moscow and one in Rome. The Master had won both. But in each, in order to ensure victory, he had had to reach deeper than ever before into his innermost resources for a key to unlock his pupil's strategy. Now the third game had reached its critical third quarter. If The Master won (and who could doubt that he would?), the title would remain his. Even if, by some miracle, Amato managed to win the three remaining games, the resulting draw would still count as a victory for the title holder. To state the matter in a way wholly foreign to the spirit of the contest—let alone of Kalire itself—to keep his chances alive, Amato had to win this third game.

Such was the situation when The Master, having entered the hall, bowed to the Supreme Arbitrator, sat down, touched hands formally across the board with his challenger and then accepted the envelope containing Amato's sealed move. He opened it, scanned the paper, nodded to his pupil, and permitted himself the ghost of a smile. It was exactly the move he had expected. He leant forward and placed a blue counter upon the designated

square. On the display board above their heads a blue light winked on and off. A faint sigh went up from the main body of the hall. The struggle was rejoined.

Immediately after breakfast the following morning, Roger took his micomicon down to the depot in the town and left it for the broken spool to be repaired. Having been assured that it would be ready for him to collect within the hour, he elected to retrace his path of the previous day, wandering out along the stone-flagged quay to where the mole jutted out across the harbor mouth.

The morning sun was shining just as brilliantly upon the flanks of the volcanic hills and scooping up its shimmering reflections from the restlessly looping wavelets in the inner basin; the brightly shawled women were still crying out to each other in their strange parrot-patios from their ornate balconies; the gulls were still shrieking and swirling as they dived for the scraps; ostensibly it was all just as it had been the day before. And yet the boy was conscious that, in some not quite definable way, things were subtly different. Something had changed. Frowning, he scanned the horizon for signs of clippers plying the trade route but could see nothing. Then, moved by a sudden impulse, he clambered over the parapet and scrambled down the rocks to the ledge where he had last seen the two boys fishing.

There were dried fish scales glinting like chips of mica on the rocks, and he picked one or two of them off with his fingernail. Having examined them, he flipped them into the green, rocking waters below him. Then he squatted down, cupped his chin in his hands and stared down at the flickering shadows of the little fish as they came darting to the surface attracted by the glittering morsels.

He thought of Anne finning her golden way across the bottom of the sunlit pool, and from there his memory winged on to the curious conversation he had had with the old man. As he started to recall it, he began to realize that it was his recollection of their meeting in the darkness which had contrived to insinuate itself between him and the brilliant scene about him. "It's what it *is*, not what anyone *says* it is." What was that supposed to mean? And how could red *be* blue? Even if everyone *called* it blue, it would still *be* red. Or would it? A sharp splinter of sunlight struck dazzling off a wave straight into his eyes. He covered them

with his hands, and suddenly, bright as an opal on his retina, he seemed to see again the glowing spark of The Master's cigar and above it the shape of the bearded lips blowing it brighter. Yet, even as he followed the point of light, its color began to change, becoming first mauve, then purple, and finally a brilliant aquamarine. And yet, indisputably, it was still the original spark.

He opened his eyes wide, blinked, and gazed about him. As he did so, he heard a voice calling down to him from above. He looked up and saw the silhouette of a head against the arching blue backdrop of the morning sky. He screwed up his eyes, smiled, and shook his head.

The man's voice came again, and Roger guessed it must be one of the waiters from the hotel. He spread his hands helplessly. *"No habla Espanol,* Senor," he tried. *"Scusi. Estoy Americano."*

The man laughed. "I was only asking what it was like down there," he said in perfect English.

Roger shrugged. "Well, it's OK. I guess," he said. "If you like sitting on rocks, that is."

"Nothing I like better. Mind if I join you?"

"Sure. Come on down."

The man stepped over the low parapet and descended, surefooted, to the ledge. Once there, he glanced about him, selected a smoothish rock and sat down, letting his long legs dangle over the waters. He drew a deep breath and let it out in a luxurious sigh. "That's great," he murmured. "Just great."

Roger scrutinized him out of the tail of his eye. He was darkhaired, his face was tanned, and he had pale smile creases at the corners of his eyes and mouth. Roger placed him as being in his middle twenties. "Are you here for the tourney?" he asked.

"That's right."

"I thought you must be."

"How so? I speak a pretty fair Espanol, don't I?"

"Yes. I guess so. But you're not Spanish, are you?"

"No."

"Where are you from?"

"California mostly."

Roger poked his little finger up his nose and scratched around thoughtfully for a moment. Then he glanced sideways at the newcomer, removed his finger and said, "Would you mind if I asked you a question?"

"Well, that all depends, doesn't it? I mean there are questions and questions."

"Oh, it's not personal," said Roger hastily.

"Then I'd say there's just that much less chance of my being able to answer it. But go ahead anyway."

Roger pointed across the inner harbor to where a woman in a flame-colored shawl was leaning over a fisherman on the water below her. "Do you see that woman in the red dress?" he asked.

The man followed his pointing finger. "I see her," he said.

"If I said she was wearing a *blue* dress, would I be right or wrong?"

The man glanced at him, and his brown eyes widened in fractional astonishment. "Would you mind repeating that?"

Roger did so.

"Yes, I thought that's what you said." The dark head turned and he stared again at the woman. "A *blue* dress?" he repeated. "What kind of a crazy question is that, for Godsake?"

"I don't know," Roger confessed. "But last night The Master told me that if enough people said red was blue, then it *was* blue."

The young man turned and stared at him. "Come again. *Who* said it?"

"The Master. I was talking to him out in the hotel garden after supper last night. But what I'm wondering is, if there's only *two* people and one says a thing's red and the other says it's blue—well, what *is* it?"

The young man lifted his right hand and drew it slowly across his mouth. "He said red *was* blue?"

"Well, not exactly. He said it's what it is. He said it's not *really* red or blue or anything—except itself."

The young man's eyes had taken on a curiously opaque expression, and though Roger knew he was looking *at* him, he also knew he wasn't really seeing him. "I guess it's a pretty dumb sort of question," he said at last. "But, I don't know, somehow it's been bothering me."

"How's that?"

"It's just been bugging me, that's all."

"Yes, I can see that." The young man nodded. "So. What kind of an answer are you hoping for?"

"I don't know."

"What's your name, son?"

"Roger. Roger Herzheim."

"Well, Roger, I don't know that I can help. But how's this for a start? Let's say there are *things* and there are the *names* of those things. Right? Well, it's from the names we derive our *ideas* of the things. D'you follow?"

Roger nodded.

"OK. Now if we play around with the *ideas* for long enough, then, sure as hell, we'll get to believing that the ideas *are* the things. But they're not. Not really. The things are the things themselves. They always have been and, I guess, they always will be. It's a pretty profound truth really. At least that's what I think he was saying. But, hell, Roger, I could be *way* out."

Roger nodded rather doubtfully, and as he did so, his attention was caught by a sudden silver flickering far out on the eastern horizon. "Hey! Look!" he cried. "That's the first today! Just look at her *go!*"

The young man grinned broadly as he turned and gazed out to sea. "Yep, she's a real beauty," he said. "*Leviathan* class, I'd guess."

"*Leviathan?*" echoed Roger scornfully. "With five t'gallants? Why sure she's an *Aeolian.* And on the Barbados run too. Do you know that bird can *average* thirty knots?"

"Thirty knots, eh?" repeated the young man reverently. "You don't say so? Incredible!"

Half an hour later they strolled back into town to collect Roger's micomicon. As they were walking up the main street, Roger heard someone cry out: "Guilio! Where the helluv you *been,* man? I've been scouring the whole goddamn *town* for you! Tuomati's done a depth analysis of the whole Mardonian sector and he reckons he's found us some real counter chances."

"That's great, Harry," said the young man, with what seemed to Roger rather tepid enthusiasm. "Well, *ciao,* Roger. I'm really glad to have met you. I surely won't ever again mistake a *Leviathan* for an *Aeolian.*"

Roger smiled and waved his hand shyly, but Guilio Romano Amato was already striding away up the hill deep in conversation with his Second.

Roger spent the afternoon beside the pool hoping that Anne would reappear. She never did. Nor did she show up in the hotel dining room for the evening meal. Roger accompanied his mother

up to their bedroom and, in response to her query as to how he intended to spend his evening, told her that he thought maybe he'd look in at the Spectators' Gallery for a while.

"I'm truly flattered to hear it, honey. But isn't *Clippers* on So-Vi tonight?"

"Sure it is. But not till ten. So I thought I'd finish off my letter to dad first, then take in a bit of the tourney. You've drawn 58, haven't you?"

"That's right, pet. Board 58, Section 7. I'll give you a wave."

It was not until his mother had wafted him her ritual kiss and left the apartment that it occurred to the boy to wonder why he had not told her of either of his meetings with the two champions.

At nine o'clock he rode the elevator down to the first floor and followed the indicators to the Spectators' Gallery. The sign STANDING ROOM ONLY was up, but Roger contrived to squeeze his way in and found a place to squat down on one of the steep gangways. The general tourney had already been in session for over an hour, but The Master and his challenger had only just taken their seats on the dais, and the red light which marked The Master's sealed move was still winking on the display board. There was an almost palpable atmosphere of tension in the hall as Amato surveyed the field before him.

Roger glanced across at one of the monitor screens and saw a huge close-up of the young man's face. It could almost have been a death mask, so total was its stillness. Then the picture flicked over to the board itself and showed Amato's hand dipping into his bowl of counters. The whole vast hall had become as silent as though everyone had been buried beneath a thick, invisible blanket of snow.

Beneath Guilio's slim fingers the counter slowly turned and turned again. Red, blue; red, blue; red, blue; and then he had reached out and laid it quietly on the board. The tip of the index finger of his right hand lingered upon it for a long, thoughtful moment and then withdrew.

As the blue light sprang out on the display, there came a sound which was part whisper, part sigh, as the spectators let out their pent breath. And then, from somewhere down below out of Roger's view, in the section of the tourney which held the players of the Premier Grade, there came the shocking sound of someone clapping. In a moment it had caught hold like a brush fire, and it was at least a minute before the controller's impassioned pleas for

silence could make themselves heard above the unprecedented hubbub.

"What is it?" Roger demanded, shaking the arm of the person beside him. "What's he done?"

"I don't know, son. Frankly it seems crazy to me. But I guess it must be something pretty special to earn that sort of hand from the Premiers."

Roger turned to the monitor screen for enlightenment and was treated to a close-up of The Master's face. He was smiling the sort of smile that might have wreathed the face of a conquistador as he emerged from some high Andean jungle to find himself gazing down upon El Dorado. He leant across the board and murmured something to the impassive Amato. The concealed microphones picked up his voice instantly, and around the world was relayed one single vibrant word, the supreme accolade: *"Beautiful!"*

As he was fully entitled to do under the rules, The Master requested a statutory thirty-minute recess, which the Arbitrator immediately granted. The clocks were stopped; the two contestants touched hands; and The Master rose from his cushion, beckoned to Anne, and vanished with her through the curtained exit at the back of the dais.

The microphones picked up the whisper of conversation between Amato and his Seconds. As the cameras zoomed in on them, Roger saw that the two men were gazing at Guilio with what can only be described as awe. The young man simply shook his head and shrugged as if to signify that what they were saying scarcely concerned him. He was right.

That single move of Amato's has justly earned the title of "The Immortal," though, by today's standards, one must admit that it does have a distinctly old-fashioned air. The fact is that after an interval of close on thirty years, it is all but impossible to convey just how exceptional it was at the time it was first played. To appreciate it fully, one would have to re-create the whole electric atmosphere of that tourney and the seemingly impregnable position that The Master had established for himself in the match. It has been claimed with some substance that Amato's ninety-second move in the third game of the Thirty-Third World Series marked mankind's coming of age. But probably Amato himself came closer to the truth when he remarked to a reporter at the conclusion of the match: "Hell, man, it was just a matter

of realizing that you can walk backwards through a door marked PUSH."

Twelve years later, in the preface to his monumental work *One Thousand Great Games,* Guilio elaborated upon this as follows: "I realized at that moment why The Master had chosen that particular paradox from St. John of the Cross as prefix to his *Game of Games.* Up to that instant in time, my whole approach to Kalire had been based upon the overwhelming desire to win. In order to become that which I was not (in my case, at that time, the winner of that vital third game), I had to go by a way which I did not know. There was only one such way available to me. I had to desire not defeat (that seemed inevitable anyway) but the achievement of a state of mind in which winning or losing ceased to have meaning for me. In other words, I had to gain access to the viewpoint from which Kalirinos and Arimanos are perceived to be one and the same being. In the timeless moment during which I turned that counter over between my fingers, I understood the significance of The Master's casual observation which I had heard for the first time that very morning: 'There is neither red nor blue, there is only the thing itself.' The thing itself was nothing less than the pure quintessence of The Game—an eternal harmonic beauty which obeys its own code of laws and whose sublime and infinite subtlety we are fortunate to glimpse perhaps once or twice in a lifetime. Let us call it simply 'the Truth of the Game.' At that moment I recognized it, and I laid my counter where I did for no other reason than my overwhelming desire to preserve the pattern forever in my own mind's eye."

So the shapes dissolve and reassemble in the swirl of Time. Everything changes; everything remains the same. We know now what we are, and some of us believe we have an inkling of what we may become.

Thirty-four years have passed since Guilio Romano Amato dethroned The Master and became The Master in his turn. He held the title for seven years, lost it to Li Chang, and then regained it two years later in the epic encounter of '57. In '62 the Universal Grade of Grand Master was established, and The Game moved into its present phase.

It only remains to outline briefly the subsequent histories of those persons who have been sketched in this little memoir.

First, The Master himself. He died peacefully at his home in Pasadena three years after relinquishing his title. At the time of

his death his age by calendar computation was 273 years; by physical measurement, 81 years. Despite his insistence that he wished for no ostentatious ceremonial of any kind, his funeral was marked by a full week of mourning throughout the capitals of the world, and the memorial service at the academy was attended by the ambassadors from more than two hundred nations.

Guilio Amato retired from active play in '61 and since then has devoted his energies to supervising the work of the academy, of which he had been principal since The Master's death. His best known work—apart from the *Thousand Great Games* already mentioned—is undoubtedly his variorum edition of The Master's own *Championship Games,* which in itself probably constitutes the best standard world history of Kalire.

After The Master's death Anne Henderson returned to the theater, where she enjoyed a successful career up until her second marriage in '59. She now lives in Italy with her family. Her delightful *Memories of The Master* was published in '64.

Roger Herzheim never did become a clipper captain. At the age of fifteen he sat for a scholarship to the academy and soon proved that he had an outstanding talent for The Game. At 21 he won his first major tournament, emerging a clear four points ahead of all the other contestants. By 25 he was an acknowledged Master and acted as Second to Guilio Amato in his final Championship match. He gained his own Grand Master's Robe in '67 and was unsuccessful challenger for the World Title two years later. He won the Title conclusively in '71 and has held it ever since. But his days too are surely numbered. *Sic itur ad astra.*

(This fragment of autobiography was found among the papers of the ex-World Master, Roger Herzheim. He died on March 23, 2182, aged 68 years.)

CAN THESE BONES LIVE?

by Ted Reynolds

There have been several pieces in this collection dealing with the ethical and moral problems of a human society adrift in an infinite multi-world universe. This story sums it all up with one final smasher of a question on which hangs the entire argument for the existence of the intelligent species homo sapiens terrestris.

She spins in space, a mere point of view, and far away the stars wheel slowly about her. Curiosity builds, and with gathering intensity she strives to see, to pierce through those uncaring flares of silence. With effort comes strain, comes pain, mounting in linked agony with her struggle. The stars begin to shimmer and melt, the blackness coating the universe beyond them to ripple, then, transluce . . . and then the pain mounts past endurance, she gives over in defeat; victorious night rolls back, a ponderous black drop framing meaningless lights. The pain wanders off somewhere, leaving her limp with exhaustion, and for ages she hangs bodiless in nothing, the stars sliding steadily past her vision, until once more she will be ready to try to see *through* . . .

She woke.

She lay on the soft slope of a swelling which rose gently in the middle of a wooded noplace. Sun beat down warmly on bare

shoulders. She lay a while, blinking her eyes, the dream fading away as consciousness grew that something was wrong, unexpected.

Finally she sat up and looked at herself. In sudden panic reflex she whipped herself over and burrowed belly down, as best she could in the short grass. She lay there, breathing rapidly, as minutes passed with no sound but quiet wind and distant bird, no movement but that of a small industrious ant a few inches from her eyes.

Slowly raising her head, she scanned the horizon cautiously. Mellow dips and swells. Shrubs in flower, a few drifting cirrus high, high up. A bird flitted twittering across the sky. No one in sight.

Thank God. And she lying here in the open, stark naked . . .

Squirming on her stomach like a celluloid Indian, she negotiated her way to the nearest bush, where she squatted for a longer look around. Not a soul anywhere. How did she ever get herself into *this!* Well, first things first. Times enough to think of reasons after she'd found herself something to wear.

She reached the top of the rise; the world spread about her lovely, lonely, bare as herself. No house; no road. An opossum curled under a bush, ignoring her. She sat there in bewilderment, and gradually another thought grew in upon her, something else that didn't make sense, that wasn't quite right.

She had died. She clearly remembered her death.

By late afternoon, fear that someone would see her was being supplemented by fear that no one would. Still unclothed, but bearing a large portion of bush before her, she moved down the slope of a hill towards the rivers, lying beneath her in leisurely looping swaths which gleamed in the sunlight.

Anywhere in her part of the world, she thought, there would be some sort of town at the confluence of two rivers of this size. Here was nothing but the grassy slopes, studded with isolated groves of slender trees, slurring off along the river borders into marshes and mudflats where waterbirds splashed and fed. No river traffic; no jet trails; no.

It was now clear she was heading west, at least if the sun kept to the old path . . . if that *were* the old sun. At this point, she wasn't laying any odds.

When the moon rose, its familiar face told her she was on Earth after all. But wasn't it a shade too large? No, don't think about *that* one! It's just the right size.

Perhaps, she thought vaguely, she was Eve? Was Adam around the next bend? No, far more likely she was around the bend.

That night she huddled beside a fallen trunk; not for warmth, (she discovered for the first time, *emotionally,* that trees are not warm-blooded) but for the rough contact with something solidly actual. Staring blankly up into the featureless night, she retreated into her memories, recalling the tubes and needles and pains, the fading lights and voices and her dying. The last things she could recall were those instants of observing the operation from outside of her own body, and realizing even then this was only her mind's final defense mechanism to soften the inevitable annihilation—and she had *known* it was for keeps. So why hadn't it been? Why was she here? And why wasn't anybody else?

I can't hold a Jehoshaphat, she thought, all by myself, can I?

The night was warm, the trees stoically silent. The largest animal she had seen all day was a badgery or woodchuckish thing looking out of a hole in a clay bank. That kind of fear didn't touch her now. Just the one cry filled her mind as she fell asleep. How am I here at all; why aren't I still dead?

She didn't really expect a reply. She got one.

She was standing on the slope where she had first awakened, and was looking out across the world when the Roanei appeared, quite abruptly, as their habit always and everywhere is. She watched them as they debarked themselves and spread out for picnicking, and she understood them, as one will in a dream, and at the same time knew that neither the way they had arrived nor the way they looked would make the least bit of sense to her when she awoke. She couldn't even be sure if the Roanei were many, or was one.

One of them, or part of it, appeared at her side. A truly lovely little world, it indicated somehow, and, oh, my, it went on in exaggerated surprise as if an adult condescending to a child's make-believe, what have we here? It signified the ground at her feet where a minute gleam sparked the soil. It uncovered the gleam and withdrew a shining bone. The Roanei totality flowed around the spot to contemplate the discovery.

The one turned to her and waved the bone gently. So there was once a species of some accomplishment on this world, it rendered cheerfully, and now there are no more of it. How interesting. Reconstruction is in order. It tossed the bone on the earth, where it lay as the Roanei resurrected it, in that unique way of theirs, which they make appear so simple, and which perhaps really is simple, only they never let on how it's done. In a gradual, perhaps mildly obscene process the bone became her own unclad unconscious form.

One aspect of the Roanei turned to her dream portion and conveyed, you know we are nothing like this, but it will serve you well enough as symbol, all of this is metaphor, it chanted,

is metaphor,
is metaphor,
all of this is metaphor
for a somewhat complex reality.

It touched her forehead. Your questions will be answered, it remarked. Forever farewell. And they were gone.

At least that was as near as she could reconstruct the dream when she woke by the fallen log.

The dream stayed solidly with her as she wandered down the way of the river. It had been very real, had spoken with authority, not as one of the scribes. Either it was a message, a real answer to the question she had fallen asleep with, or her dreaming self now had resources of imagination she'd certainly never had her first time through life. She would rather have dreamed of frustrating cocktail parties and ominous taxicabs the way she'd used to.

An *authentic* dream? She wished there were some people around (among other reasons) to ask whether this fell within *their* range of experience. It might well be one of those numerous everybody-else-knows-it-happens-but-nobody-thought-to-tell-*me* phenomena.

She went on, and the further she went, the more people she didn't find, nor their leftovers. She found and munched berries, drank from the river, and didn't die a second time on the spot, though the diet hardly excited her. She went to some lengths to find *something* to wear at first, with the dogged persistence of an Edison trying electric light filaments. Eventually she found a kind

of tree, from which the bark came off in fairly large slices, and lashed herself up in some of it with creepers. She called the tree "birch" provisionally, and thought there might never be anyone to tell her if she had guessed right.

The vestments were rather unpleasant to wear, and already seemed a waste of time and modesty. She could no longer really believe there was anyone left to see or to know or to care.

It appeared a beautiful world, if one cared about such things. Summer, she supposed, nature at its most prodigal expansiveness. Nothing hovering here of Man, not even a dwindling fond memory. I wonder, she wondered, how they finally managed to do us all in, but she soon found she'd rather not think about that.

For several nights she carefully kept that, and all other questions, out of her mind as she composed herself to sleep. She wasn't ready for any more answers just yet.

Sometime during the second week of her second life she gave up on her leggings completely. They seemed quite superfluous. She decided to carve a diary on the bark instead.

She scratched with the sharp end of a stick.

"Dear Diary:

"In order to preserve my sanity, in case I've still got it, I shall write what occurs in proper order. Or in case, in my lonely senile years, I forget the earlier days of this second fleshy incarceration. Or rather, that I may inscribe the relevant facts within which lie the clues I may be someday able to decipher, as to the reason for my improbable situation. Or maybe for the hell of it. Anyway, I write.

"Item: what we used to call humanity is gone, extinct, obliterated. There's just me, alone, at a time seemingly long after the close of man's gory story. I have found some suspicious mounds, but within them, as deep as I've cared to dig, no paper, wood, or metal, nor plastic nor ceramic. A couple of bones. But for all I know, not even human bones.

"So I linger on, long after the multitudes have passed from off the stage of life. This, then, is a posthumanous diary.

"Ouch. That wasn't very successful.

"Hell, one tries to write pretty, even to a private diary, in the vague feeling that someone sometime will read the words. Even when I was a girl, locking my personal diary in my desk, screaming in wrath if my brother entered while I was writing, somehow I

wrote for everybody, for posterity maybe. I winced at a grammatical lapse, an awkward phrase . . .

"What does it matter now? I'm everybody else's posterity, and they've left nothing for me to read.

"But I do seem to have strayed from the subject . . ."

Thus far took many hours, and endless pieces of bark. She realized she couldn't lug all that bark around with her. She also found she couldn't even make out a lot of what she'd just written. She gave up her diary.

A little later, threading through breast-high wild grasses down a shallow valley, her dream recurred to her, bound up somehow with trappings of guilt. She tried half-heartedly to dismiss it. So what if she couldn't remember dreams with such authentic auras from her earlier existence? Hadn't she been absolutely convinced by other auras, that afterwards, to her sorrow, had proved quite meretricious?

Still, she couldn't pass it off as just another dream. For one thing, if it was more than a dream, if it somehow embodied honest-to-God's-sake truth, then it was probably very important.

She sat down where she was amid the grasses and tried to work it out. If one quite impossible thing had happened—she *had* come back to life—then why not think of other impossible things? Like maybe the whole human race could be brought back.

If me, she thought, why not anybody else? Why not everybody else?

And then there would be plenty of people to read my diary. Isn't *that* worth something?

She lay on her back where she was. It was a moist day, and she stared up past the long stalks gratefully condensing droplets from the hazy air, to the heavy blade tips far above her, and thought hard. She thought all the afternoon, and finally fell asleep in the same spot with a single question, cut and hewed and placed upright in the forecourts of her mind.

"Can *everybody* be brought back to life the way I've been?"

And answer came, of a sort.

She stands on the Moon, on the harsh dead lunar soil, and watches the Earth in the sky, so beautifully smeared in its streaky whites, blues, browns, greens that her throat throbs with longing. It hangs up there in the black, unmoving, unwinking, and she watches it in the cold and the silence.

A speck of red, tiny but fluid, appears at the rim of the sphere, out of tune, oddly malignant. It grows, flings out extended filaments across the globe, which coalesce, puddle together, as the Earth slowly becomes tinged with crawling, hideous with roiling, bloated with loathsome red, until the last touch of green is extinguished; and at that moment the whole creeping cancerous red Earth . . . opens up . . . into a . . . perfect white blossom floating serene and still and beautiful on the face of darkness . . .

Do you really want it back the way it was, ask the lunar rocks in their barren silent idiom.

It's not clear why you'd want the whole race back, blazes the sun, shining down eternally, up top left center, but you can always ask; *not promising any reply.*

Ask once only, *that is, tinkle the constellations, strewn endlessly across forever. It is tedious to consider invalid requests. One individual per species is usually* quite *sufficient.*

And the Earth, silent blossom, silently whispers, be very sure before you ask. Cannot unwish wishes once wished. Remember . . .

And just before she wakes, one very brief glimpse of a withered hag, creeping under the weight of a string of sausages firmly welded to the tip of her nose.

That last touch might account for the intense irritation with which she awoke. It seemed to be rubbing it in a little *too* much!

She had been around long enough that the season seemed to be changing. With an abrupt memory of what winter would mean without civilized amenities, she headed south.

A few months of utter solitude, and she was about ready to take the Roanei up on their offer, or challenge, and ask for the return of humanity. But the terms in which the matter had been couched had somehow kept her up till now from requesting a total species regeneration. She hadn't been able to bring herself, quite, to fall asleep with that demand in the forefront of her thoughts.

She headed south, wondering if she were on the North American continent, or if that geographical distinction didn't mean anything any longer. She had no idea how long it had been since the Age of Man. Some animals and constellations were quite familiar

to her, others she felt she should surely have been aware of if they'd existed before. But maybe not. There were no large animals, predatory or otherwise; she ate randomly, things bland but sustaining; she never grew ill. She passed various flora, fauna, and geography, and paid little attention, existing most often by choice in the world of her own thoughts. She played there-are-other-people-somewhere games till it hurt too much.

She wished she were a logical thinker, a scientist or something, rather than an ordinary nobody-special. Here they brought back one person, and perhaps the future existence of the whole race hung on the person's decisions, and it was only her. It didn't, somehow, seem very fair. She wasn't all that bright, why didn't they bring back Einstein or von Neumann or somebody, who could figure out what to do in these really rather unprecedented circumstances? I mean, she thought, if I've virtually got to decide whether to ask for the resurrection of the whole human race, hadn't I ought to be a better representative of the species? Why couldn't they have snagged Gandhi or Schweitzer?

She knew what she should do, she thought—ask them for the whole human race back. Then she wandered off into wondering if that included the ancient Romans and Egyptians, or just the last generation that went defunct. There'd be population problems again. She wondered if she'd be allowed to pick and choose . . . "no Albanians or Victorians, please" . . . and realized she was off the track again.

Why *not* ask for the race back? What countervailing factors were there? They said she could *ask*.

Not, she had to admit to herself, that she'd ever been a true mankind enthusiast. She'd liked some people, sure. But she'd never reached the point, never lived long enough, maybe never *would* have lived long enough, to accept the existence of others with that wholehearted acceptance with which she accepted her own.

Of course she felt very strongly the responsibility (if her dreams weren't just dreams), of being the one who *could* decide, any night now, whether humanity should be brought to life again. But humanity had never turned her on. Of course she would like someone, almost anyone, to talk to, to write a diary for, to show things to, to sleep with . . . that was not meant, that was to be censored, please ignore . . . surely, you understand what goes

through the mind, through the body, when one is *alone*. Forgive . . .

Who was there to understand? Who to forgive?

She eventually came to a conclusion, and with it, came back to awareness of her surroundings. She had attained different types of foliage than she was used to, less stark and noble, more entwined and languorous; her images of the south, bayou and magnolia and mangrove, seemed to be closer. South, she thought, how much further?

She found some hammocky roots and made herself comfortable, determined to do this thing right. The onus had fallen on her, for whyever, and she would pick it up and get it over with. She must be cunning and clever, pit herself against the Roanei for the lives of her own unreborn species. These Roanei will have their price. For sufficient reason, they'll resurrect. Find the price, persuade them, convince them . . .

Sleepline, to be held into the night shadows. "What must we pay you for the rebirth of mankind? We'll pay you anything. Name the price."

And slept. And dreamed.

It crouches towering against the stars on a pinnacle ridge, far above her, black against the sky. Its clutching talons curve among the rocks, its hawk features jut proudly upwards against the cold sparks of fire. It is utterly awesome and arrogant.

She knows, in her dream that she sees the last, the resurrected specimen of the Mnestepoi. He is making his great pitch to the Roanei, and is he laying it on strong! Power he offers, in all four hands, and knowledge unimagined, and riches untold. It is a bit hard to follow, because it is full of concepts she can't quite get her mind around, but the idea that the Mnestepoi hold the riches of all yearning, the knowledge of all ages, the powers of the universe, comes through loud and clear. And all these will be for the Roanei alone, if they'll only bring the rest of the Mnestepoi back to life. The Roanei can rule the universe forever, cries out that thing on the crag, they will have the cosmic mastership the Mnestepoi had planned for themselves and almost attained, would have attained but for one little unforeseen accident which had erased them. All will be for the Roanei, the Mnestepoi will be their humble servants, if only they can live. If a few of them can live. If a single mate can live . . .

And from among the stars, from that distant wherever the Roanei have got to, comes the answer.

"What would we want with power, you call it, with riches, with knowledge? These mean nothing to us. We do not comprehend the value you put on these things, nor do we care. The answer to your request is no."

And with a shriek of despairing rage, the last of the Mnestepoi hurls himself with ravening fury at the sky, hangs clawing against the stars, and plunges to sickening destruction on the cliffs beneath.

It shook her up a bit, that dream. She felt at the time that that creature could actually deliver what he promised. If ever she had felt the cold beat of power, it was in the looks and the speech of that monster. She had to admit she was sort of glad that the Roanei didn't take him up on the proposal. Maybe she was being provincial, and the Mnestepoi were just grand folks when you got to know them, but still . . .

And she never thought again that the Roanei might be bribable —not with anything man had to offer . . .

She had stopped going south. She had run out of things she knew were good to eat, and had to face learning all over again, or staying up where things were more familiar. It had come to her with a sort of unpleasant realization that there wasn't a thing known to be poison that wasn't found out by a lot of people dying rather unpleasantly. As the last human being, there was need to be more careful of her existence. She'd have to accept a few cool nights.

So much for her half-planned scheme of getting across to Africa where her memory told her the Atlantic was narrower (if she *was* in America, and if the continents hadn't drifted), and seeing if any traces of the pyramids or the Great Wall of China could still be traced. She'd stay around here, wherever that was, and try to make friends with the animals that looked like rabbits but acted like squirrels; they looked the most tamable. She'd never been much for pets before, but circumstances alter cases.

She couldn't forget her responsibility completely. It came creeping back into her mind in subtle ways, alternately making her curse herself, the Roanei, or the rest of humanity. Another day arrived when she realized she'd have to try again. She couldn't let her own hang-ups keep her from seeing if she could

bring back humanity. It didn't matter what she thought of people, whether she liked them or not. It was a trust, like when her mother had given her money to buy something at the grocery, and she'd had to get what Mama wanted, even if she'd rather have had bubble gum instead. Anyway, if mankind can be brought back, she thought, it will have to include some psychoanalyst who can make me feel better about it all.

Man must be brought back; the Roanei have to be convinced we're worth saving. Why? Why indeed?

She walked to the top of a hill to sleep. She gazed out to where a shallow sea drowsed on the horizon. The climate was definitely softer this life, yes, and healthier. She never felt the need of constructed shelter. She lay down under the deepening evening blue and pondered her approach.

She planned her dream query, etched her question with all her subtlety, and the selective memory of an arts major the first time around. She ran over in her mind all that man had made of wonder and beauty, for it was all part of the question. She let her mind, dimming toward sleep, dip and soar over the finest she knew of man's creations; the spacious perspectives of the Taj Mahal, and the clumped hallelujah of Manhattan, Raphael's wistful Madonnas and the bleak clarity of Hokusai's ink line. She ran trippingly over Dante and Milton and Goethe, dipped into Keats, dabbled in Shelley, flirted with Swinburne, hovered over Blake, soaking in from each only the beauty, the feeling of joy she had received when she had first met them. In her preplanned tour she conjures up what she knows or imagines of Babylon and Athens and Samarkand, Louis XIV's Versailles and Charles II's London, Shakespeare and Michelangelo, Dostoevski and Klee and Melville and Miro and Bartok and Pynchon, and as she feels herself slipping into the nightly oblivion she rolls it all up in a single ball of ultimate question, a cry of the heart, "Can you let all this die? Don't you care to bring back all this creation, this searching for beauty and truth and loveliness . . . this *humanness* back?"

And she falls asleep. The hard thing in this case being to *avoid* certain humannesses.

And she dreams.

They are the Coronolee. What they look like is irrelevant. It is what they touch that matters. They stroke the rocks and the trees till they respond in joy and beauty. They build mild cities that

fondle the seas and skies, plant gardens that woo the earth; and grow in skill and art and scope with the ages, till all they handle becomes a wonder and a delight. All that see the works of the Coronolee exclaim "Ahhh, yes!"

They soften their suns to mellow hues that gentle all they fall upon. They form worlds from which one would willingly never part, where momentary existence is a flowing environmental caress. They meet other races and speak to them and touch them and somehow, species with hard edges and callous beginnings and mean needs begin to warm and soften and flow in beauty.

And of a mere moment, as the universe plunges through time, the Coronolee are gone. Something had happened to them or been done to them or . . . anyway, it was so ugly, such *bad art, that they went quietly.*

And—how long after, who knows—the Roanei arrive and hear of the extinct Coronolee, still somewhat of an epic in that part of space at that time. And so, as they always do, the Roanei resurrect one member of that species, and leave it alone on the barren remains of one of the Coronol worlds, amid the relics and wreckage of departed splendour, and depart—leaving, of course, a dream-channel link. And the last of the Coronolee lives a short space, as their livespan goes, puttering about the shards of beauty, trying to set things to rights, and then asks from the depth of its heart and the height of its soul that its people might be brought back from nothingness to correct this ugliness. The Roanei hear immediately from the far places they were then in, and answer:

No. What value is there in the things your people have done? None of them matter to us at all.

And the dream link is broken forever. And the last Coronal dies, in shame and chagrin, at the ugliness of the world. And no one ever lives there again.

That was her dream. It was quite discouraging. In the face of what the Coronolee had achieved, even what she could rescue clinging to from the wrack of dream, what man ever did seemed not a little childish. If she'd ever loved anything human, it was the arts, but compared to what *they* were capable of, even Mozart and Seami looked like the triflings of a child that may amount to something someday if he ever grows up and doesn't get too snotty.

And *they* didn't impress the Roanei one smidgeon.
She had lost, she knew, another round.

She lived pleasantly enough under the trees, that might be oaks or beeches, or banyans for all she knew, surrounded by her squirabbits, and on the whole content. Time passed, usually without her noticing or being bothered by its passing, but once in a while she was reminded by something or other of time passing and duty undone, and went through a heavy guilt session.

It was really a bit chilling to think that she hadn't yet actually *asked* for humanity to be brought back yet. She did have some symptoms of growing older, and someday she might drop dead of an aneurysm or something, and there's the last chance gone for everybody that ever was. Even if *she* didn't much believe it's a chance, shouldn't she at least *try* it? Think of all the people who are dead forever, and just maybe her mere asking could bring them back.

Sometimes, now she could never bring herself to say it out loud but she thought it . . . sometimes she thought she just didn't want to bring anybody back. Did she really want any of them? Had they ever been at all important to her? Had she once been better off or more contented in the old human days?

On the other hand, she supposed she'd be very important to them, a sort of goddess at least, if she could have them all brought back . . . *if* they ever believed what she told them, that it was her that brought them back. She imagined all sorts of people would be quick to claim all kinds of things once they were brought back.

Finally, on the eve of a rare day of rolling thunder and rain, she looked out at the last fugitive wisps of sun through angry clouds, the first she'd seen of its light all day, and thought she had the answer. She dreaded using the dream channel again, but she would have to. She hoped it would be the last time.

She spent the evening thinking over the good and just and decent things men had (sometimes) done. She poured into a common pool her ideal portraits of Jesus and Buddha and Thomas Assisi and Florence Nightingale and little dutch boys at dikes and men in newspaper writeups who die saving children from burning buildings and her cousin Martha who broke an elbow getting a kitten out of a well. She wished she could add something of her own, but she well knew that she had never lived for anybody or

died for anybody but herself. Maybe now she could make up for that. Alone on the wet earth, naked to the chill breeze, no human eye to see, she slept her question.

"I challenge you, Roanei. These are things men have done. Are you worse than man was? Can you do less for man than man, at his best, could do for his fellow man?"

She learned the answer.

It was early enough in the history of the cosmos that the galaxies were not far strewn as yet, and blazed in the sky as thick as stars.

She dreamt the ancient story of the Toomeer, or so the Roanei termed them. They were already of age when the Roanei were young, and they guided the Roanei and taught and aided and nurtured them, as they did so many of the races that first came into being on the earlier worlds of the earliest suns. They gave unstintingly of their time and their energy and their sustenance, and yet never seemed to call guilt into existence, as if they were rewarded simply by being permitted to give.

And the Roanei, young and precipitous race, found itself abruptly on the rim of annihilation, despite their unique talent of resurrection, or rather because of it. For the races of a galaxy rose against the arrogance and the parsimony of the Roanei in the use of their gift, and descended upon them to erase them totally.

And at the point of doom, unexpectedly, the Toomeer were there, interposing themselves between the furious attackers and the fleeing Roanei. This race is young and foolish, said the Toomeer, but let it live. We should all be for life together, not death. If you must slay, we are here . . . slay us.

And the attacking races did. In their fury and hate for the Roanei, they destroyed the intervening Toomeer to the last member of the species. But by the time the path to the Roanei lay clear again, the bloodlust had died, and they were aghast at what they had done, and at the virtue of the race they had destroyed. And they slunk back to their various home-worlds and what became of them is instructive, but not part of the dream in question.

But the Roanei followed their customary procedure. They resurrected one of the Toomeer, and told him he could request *the resurrection of his species if he chose. Perhaps he never asked; certainly the Roanei never acted. They did not understand why the Toomeer had behaved in that suicidal manner, but*

presumably they had their own satisfactions in so doing. So the Roanei reasoned. The values of the Toomeer were as meaningless to them as those of the Mnestepoi or the Coronolee or Man. Of gratitude, they showed not a trace. The Toomeer have been extinct for many billion years.

The next day was a mental seething. She sat or paced for hours, gnashing, weeping, boiling over. Those Toomeer were teachers and parents and *friends* to the Roanei, and if they were allowed to rot forever, after they had died for the Roanei, she figured she wasn't going to get far with an appeal to altruism.

In fact, she figured she'd give up.

No, wait. She could still *ask* them anyway.

Who was she trying to kid? The Roanei weren't just giving out life for the asking, that was clear. And she had never forgotten that she could ask only once; she kept remembering the sausages on the nose. She'd better hold off on that ultimate request a little longer. Once she'd pulled that, there'd be nothing left.

That night, still with fury smouldering in her breast, and an icier determination than she'd ever known in either of her lives, she stood a while, sniffing the scents she had come to know, feeling the rough bark of the trees, tasting fear and anger in the back of her throat. She did not know the answer, but she would find out. She lay down. Sleep was long in coming as she worried her question into place.

"Show me those races who *have* been granted rebirth. Why were *they* resurrected?"

It was a sleep profoundly empty of dream.

The dreamlessness had the authoritative aura of the dreams. She knew that itself was the answer.

There were no such cases. There never had been one.

She was somewhat hindered in the comments she wished to make to the Roanei by a lack of adequate knowledge of their progenitive processes or their personal antipathies. But she requested them quite strongly to be so kind as to attempt to reproduce themselves in liaison with that lifeform most unbearably repugnant to them.

She would be damned if she'd give such moral monsters the

satisfaction of seeing her cringe. She'd been long taken for a sucker, but that was over. Now she'd just have to forget it.

She was sorry for the rest of mankind, but now she knew that nothing she could have done would have brought them back anyway.

Sadists!!!

Years passed over her head, long in the passing, short in looking back on them. She was getting old.

At times the thought flirted with her mind . . . should she not at least try? There is always a first time, people used to say, and perhaps the Roanei might make their first exception in favor of man.

She wouldn't care to bet on that, though.

She had traveled long, and then settled long, developed a spot that was particularly hers in a world that was all hers in general, showed elderly crotchets to her line of squirabbits, forgot at times who and where she was.

A night came at last when, sitting on the shore of her own peculiar lake, she was in terror of death.

It had almost had her that day and was still waiting, invisibly final, in the shadows. She could no longer promise herself the whole night.

She felt she saw herself as she truly was—a lonely, selfish old woman. She never had cared for her fellow men. They could not have had a more indifferent advocate than herself.

She would not live forever. She felt an aura that told her she would not live out the next sleep. Let her at least go knowing she had done what she could. Let her pray for man to the Roanei.

The stars wheeled overhead. She could not do it. She *could not!* She was terrified to sleep without, and yet she could not. All her life, both her lives, spun about her, and all the other lives waiting for her to speak out for them, and she could not. What kind of abominable thing, then, she thought, must I be?

The east paled, she supposed it was the east, though it was only its paling that had ever told her so, and soon the sun would rise again. She could stay awake no longer, but at last she had brought her soul to a balance she could live or die with.

Lying on the shore of the lake, she wearily closed her eyes.

She did not think the Roanei ever granted wishes.

But if she could get only one wish, she would wish big.

She would wish alive something the universe needed badly, something the Roanei could not comprehend. She would wish for humanity; but not for Man.

She thought, her withered cheeks wet with her last tears, "Roanei, I wish for the rebirth of the Toomeer, they who gave themselves to death that you yourselves might live."

For the last time she moved in the landscapes of responsive dream, where human symbols clothed alien reply.

Wearily she struggled across the floor of the barren valley. The hummocks were strewn with countless bones, and they were white, and they were very dry. At a turning in the path she came across a dwarf. It squatted among the bones and stared up at her.

"Good evening," the dwarf said quietly.

"Good evening."

"You are quite certain of your wish?" it asked. "This is forever, you know. You wish for the rebirth of a race you do not know, rather than your own?"

She nodded mutely.

The dwarf's face puckered oddly. "This is very hard to understand. Did you hate your own kind so?"

"I didn't hate," she said, "but I never learned to love. I *didn't have the Toomeer to teach me," she added with a touch of bitterness.*

"Do you hate us, *then?" asked the dwarf.*

"I am trying not to hate anything for a few minutes more, and then it won't matter," she said.

The dwarf looked down at its gnarled palms, spat into them and wiped them on its thighs.

"The universe is full of creatures," it said slowly, "and all live their separate lives and crave their varied wants and hold their distinct values, and little do we comprehend or sympathize with any of them. One thing we find always and everywhere. When an individual is brought back to brief existence, and permitted to request racial rebirth, it invariably wishes the return of its own species. Each being appreciates the existence of its own kind, shares their particular values. We never grant such requests. We are rather . . . amused."

It looked at her, its eyes almost pleading. "But you . . . you have shamed us."

It was silent awhile, rocking back and forth on its haunches, considering.

"If you ask for rebirth," it said at last, "not for your own kind, but for another, we can only assume that, however little we can appreciate the reasons for such requests, there is something in that other race of higher and more universal value than the contingent preference of a single species. We feel we must grant such a request. For what is higher, should be."

The dwarf tightened its lips. "We can restore life when we choose. But the cost to us is high. High not in your concepts of money, or time, or energy, but in terms you could not grasp, though to us they are of highest importance. But somehow at this moment, although we feel the costs, we shall ignore them. Your request is granted, then. The race of the Toomeer shall live again, as they did when we were young."

She bowed her head. "Thank you," she said softly.

And the heavens darkened with a crash as a sheet of lightning caromed from end to end of the heavens above them, and out of the darkness and the lightning a voice spoke in rolling thunder.

"WE HAVE NO WISH NOR NEED TO RETURN," boomed out the voice, awesome beyond belief and yet more human than she had ever heard from the lips of men. "FOR CYCLES WE HAVE BEEN CONTENT TO REMAIN FAR BEYOND YOUR VIEW. EVER SINCE THE EVENT YOU PRESUMED OUR ANNIHILATION WE FOUND THAT THE VALUES WE HAD HELD FOR THEIR OWN SAKE WERE NOT AS EPHEMERAL AS WE HAD FEARED, FOR THEY ARE CHERISHED IN A REALITY YOU HAVE NOT YET GLIMPSED. WE OURSELVES WERE SURPRISED."

The thunder softened to an organ richness.

"WE HAVE LONG WISHED YOU TO JOIN US, ROANEI, BUT UNTIL YOU RECOGNIZED THE NEED, WE COULD NEITHER REACH NOR INSTRUCT YOU. WHAT YOU HAVE THIS DAY FOUND LACKING WITHIN YOU, WE CAN TEACH YOU TO POSSESS. WE CALL YOU TO US. WILL YOU COME?"

As the dwarf nodded, tears funneled the gnomish face.

"AND BRING BACK THIS RACE," continued the words on the wind. "WE ARE GRATEFUL TO IT. GIVE IT YOUR

POWERS AS WELL. PERHAPS THEY MAY DO SOMEWHAT WITH THEM."

The dwarf stared into the sky. "Will they do better than we? They were a race riddled with weakness and folly beyond imagining."

"THAT IS TRUE. AND WITH STRENGTH AND UNDERSTANDING. PERHAPS MAN WILL BECOME THE LATTER-DAY ROANEI OR MNESTEPOI. BUT PERHAPS IT WILL BE A NEW CORONOLEE OR TOOMEER. THE RACE HAS THE SEED, THE POTENTIAL FOR ALL *THINGS. THE UNIVERSE IS A TESTING GROUND, AND WE MUST NOT PREJUDGE WHAT THEY MAY BECOME.*

"BUT FOR YOU, ROANEI, WE HAVE BEEN LONG WAITING. COME, CHILDREN."

There was a long silence. Through the air a shaft of brighter sunlight struck down and bathed the dwarf. Finally he sighed deeply, rose to his feet, stretched his arms towards the heavens. He stood there, winds whipping his hair, tears drying on his craggy face; and as she watched, his form dwindled, dissolved, was gone.

She stood alone on the bare plain, the bones scattered far about her, white and bare and dry, to the furthest horizon. As she watched, they began to stir.

"And he said unto me, Son of man, can these bones live? And I answered, O Lord God, thou knowest."

HOMAGE TO JULES VERNE

The year 1978 marked the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the birth of Jules Verne. In European circles this did not go unnoticed. Jules Verne is still revered and read, honored for his Voyages Extraordinaires *which include, for the most part, classics which have remained the foundation stones of science fiction the world over.*

In France there were a number of works produced about Jules Verne: biographic, bibliographic, special editions of magazines, a set of commemorative dishes, and several coffee-table albums reprinting photographs, reviews, and illustrations from the 19th Century. A series of beautiful facsimile editions of his complete works are in production, recreating even the elaborate gold-embossed covers of the finer volumes of his lifetime. In Italy, in Holland and Belgium, in other countries, similar works have appeared. Even in Britain at least one commemorative volume, edited by Peter Haining, was produced.

In the United States the event went unnoticed. No magazine devoted itself to Verne, no fan gathering paid attention, nothing appeared in print—with one exception. In 1978 Joanna Russ wrote a fine story, in the Verne style, against a typical French background with which Verne himself would have been familiar. The story appeared in a 1979 issue of Fantasy & Science Fiction, *with Ms. Russ's dedicational line:* Hommage à Jules Verne.

We are pleased to reprint this delightful tale as the eleventh story of this year's "best ten" in belated homage to the greatest name in the science fiction galaxy.

THE EXTRAORDINARY VOYAGES OF AMÉLIE BERTRAND

by Joanna Russ

In the summer of 192- there occurred to me the most extraordinary event of my life.

I was traveling on business and was in the French countryside, not far from Lyons, waiting for my train on a small railway platform on the outskirts of a town I shall call Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont. (This is not its name.) The weather was cool, although it was already June, and I shared the platform with only one other passenger: a plump woman of at least forty, by no means pretty but respectably dressed, the true type of our provincial *bonne bourgeoise,* who sat on the bench provided for the comfort of passengers and knitted away at some indeterminate garment.

The station at Beaulieu, like so many of our railway stops in small towns, is provided with a central train station of red brick through which runs an arch of passageway, also of red brick, which thus divides the edifice of the station into a ticket counter and waiting room on one side and a small café on the other. Thus, having attended one's train on the wrong side of the station (for there are railroad tracks on both sides of the edifice), one may occasionally find oneself making the traversal of the station in order to catch one's train, usually at the last minute.

So it occurred with me. I heard the approach of my train, drew out my watch, and found that the mild spring weather had caused me to indulge in a reverie not only lengthy but at a distance from

my desired track; the two-fifty-one for Lyons was about to enter Beaulieu, but I was wrongly situated to place myself on board; were I not quick, no entrainment would take place.

Blessing the good fathers of Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont for their foresight in so dividing their train depot, I walked briskly but with no excessive haste towards the passage. I had not the slightest doubt of catching my train. I even had leisure to reflect on the bridge which figures so largely in the name of the town and to recall that, according to my knowledge, this bridge had been destroyed in the time of Caractacus; then I stepped between the buildings. I noticed that my footsteps echoed from the walls of the tunnel, a phenomenon one may observe upon entering any confined space. To the right of me and to the left were walls of red brick. The air was invigoratingly fresh, the weather sunny and clear, and ahead was the wooden platform, the well-trimmed bushes, and the potted geraniums of the other side of the Beaulieu train station.

Nothing could have been more ordinary.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that the lady I had seen knitting on the platform was herself entering the passage at a decorous distance behind me. We were, it seems, to become fellow passengers. I turned and raised my hat to her, intending to continue. I could not see the Lyons train, but to judge by the faculty of hearing, it was rounding the bend outside the station. I placed my hat back upon my head, reached the center of the tunnel, or rather, a point midway along its major diameter—

Will you believe me? Probably. You are English; the fogs and literature of your unfortunate climate predispose you to marvels. Your winters cause you to read much; your authors reflect to you from their pages the romantic imagination of a *refugé* from the damp and cold, to whom anything may happen if only it does so outside his windows! I am the product of another soil; I am logical, I am positive, I am French. Like my famous compatriot, I cry, "Where is this marvel? Let him produce it!" I myself do not believe what happened to me. I believe it no more than I believe that Phileas Fogg circumnavigated the globe in 187- and still lives today in London with the lady he rescued from a funeral pyre in Benares.

Nonetheless I will attempt to describe what happened.

The first sensation was a retardation of time. It seemed to me that I had been in the passage at Beaulieu for a very long time, and the passage itself seemed suddenly to become double its

length, or even triple. Then my body became heavy, as in a dream; there was also a disturbance of balance as though the tunnel sloped *down* towards its farther end and some increase in gravity were pulling me in that direction. A phenomenon even more disturbing was the peculiar *haziness* that suddenly obscured the forward end of the Beaulieu tunnel, as if Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont, far from enjoying the temperate warmth of an excellent June day, were actually melting in the heat—yes, heat!—a terrible warmth like that of a furnace, and yet humid, entirely unknown to our moderate climate even in the depths of summer. In a moment my summer clothing was soaked, and I wondered with horror whether I dared offend customary politeness by opening my collar. The noise of the Lyons train, far from disappearing, now surrounded me on all sides as if a dozen trains, and not merely one, were converging upon Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont, or as if a strong wind (which was pushing me forward) were blowing. I attempted to peer into the mistiness ahead of me but could see nothing. A single step farther and the mist swirled aside; there seemed to be a vast spray of greenery beyond—indeed, I could distinctly make out the branches of a large palm tree upon which intense sunlight was beating—and then, directly crossing it, a long, thick, sinuous, gray serpent which appeared to writhe from side to side, and which then fixed itself around the trunk of the palm, bringing into view a gray side as large as the opening of the tunnel itself, four gray columns beneath, and two long ivory tusks.

It was an elephant.

It was the roar of the elephant which brought me to my senses. Before this I had proceeded as in an astonished dream; now I turned and attempted to retrace my steps but found that I could hardly move *up* the steep tunnel against the furious wind which assailed me. I was aware of the cool, fresh, familiar spring of Beaulieu, very small and precious, appearing like a photograph or a scene observed through the diminishing, not the magnifying end, of an opera glass, and of the impossibility of ever attaining it. Then a strong arm seized mine, and I was back on the platform from which I had ventured—it seemed now so long ago!—sitting on the wooden bench while the good bourgeoise in the decent dark dress inquired after my health.

I cried, "But the palm tree—the tropical air—the elephant!"

She said in the calmest way in the world, "Do not distress yourself, monsieur. It was merely Uganda."

I may mention here that Madame Bertrand, although not in her first youth, is a woman whose dark eyes sparkle with extraordinary charm. One must be an imbecile not to notice this. Her concern is sincere, her manner *séduisante,* and we had not been in conversation five minutes before she abandoned the barriers of reserve and explained to me not only the nature of the experience I had undergone, but (in the café of the train station at Beaulieu, over a lemon ice) her own extraordinary history.

"Shortly after the termination of the Great War" (said Madame Bertrand) "I began a habit which I have continued to this day: whenever my husband, Aloysius Bertrand, is away from Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont on business, as often happens, I visit my sister-in-law in Lyons, leaving Beaulieu on one day in the middle of the week and returning on the next. At first my visits were uneventful. Then, one fateful day only two years ago, I happened to depart from the wrong side of the train station after purchasing my ticket, and so found myself seeking to approach my train through that archway or passage where you, monsieur, so recently ventured. There were the same effects, but I attributed them to an attack of faintness and continued, expecting my hour's ride to Lyons, my sister-in-law's company, the cinema, the restaurant, and the usual journey back the next day.

"Imagine my amazement—no, my stupefaction—when I found myself instead on a rough wooden platform surrounded on three sides by the massive rocks and lead-colored waters of a place entirely unfamiliar to me! I made inquiries and discovered, to my unbounded astonishment, that I was on the last railway stop or terminus of Tierra del Fuego, the southernmost tip of the South American continent, and that I had engaged myself to sail as supercargo on a whaling vessel contracted to cruise the waters of Antarctica for the next two years. The sun was low, the clouds massing above, and behind me (continuing the curve of the rock-infested bay) was a jungle of squat pine trees, expressing by the irregularity of their trunks the violence of the climate.

"What could I do? My clothing was Victorian, the ship ready to sail, the six months' night almost upon us. The next train was not due until spring.

"To make a long story short, I sailed.

"You might expect that a lady, placed in such a situation, would suffer much that was disagreeable and discommoding. So it was. But there is also a somber charm to the far south which only those who have traveled there can know: the stars glittering on the ice fields, the low sun, the penguins, the icebergs, the whales. And then there were the sailors, children of the wilderness, young, ardent, sincere, especially one, a veritable Apollo with a broad forehead and golden mustachios. To be frank, I did not remain aloof; we became acquainted, one thing led to another, and *enfin* I learned to love the smell of whale oil. Two years later, alighting from the railway train I had taken to Nome, Alaska, where I had gone to purchase my *trousseau* (for having made telegraphic inquiries about Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont, I found that no Monsieur Bertrand existed therein and so considered myself a widow) I found myself, not in my Victorian dress in the bustling and frigid city of Nome, that commercial capital of the North with its outlaws, dogs, and Esquimaux in furs carrying loads of other furs upon their sleds, but in my old, familiar visiting-dress (in which I had started from Beaulieu so long before) on the platform at Lyons, with my sister-in-law waiting for me. Not only that, but in the more than two years I had remained away, no more time had passed in what I am forced to call the real world than the hour required for the train ride from Beaulieu to Lyons! I had expected Garance to fall upon my neck with cries of astonishment at my absence and the strangeness of my dress; instead she inquired after my health, and not waiting for an answer, began to describe in the most ordinary manner and at very great length the roast of veal which she had purchased that afternoon for dinner.

"At first, so confused and grief-stricken was I, that I thought I had somehow missed the train for Nome, and that returning at once from Lyons to Beaulieu would enable me to reach Alaska. I almost cut my visit to Lyons short on the plea of ill-health. But I soon realized the absurdity of imagining that a railway could cross several thousand miles of ocean, and since my sister-in-law was already suspicious (I could not help myself during the visit and often burst out with a *'Mon cher Jack!'*) I controlled myself and gave vent to my feelings only on the return trip to Beaulieu —which, far from ending in Nome, Alaska, ended at the Beaulieu train station and at exactly the time predicted by the railway timetable.

"I decided that my two-years' holiday had been only what the men of psychological science would entitle an unusually complete and detailed dream. The ancient Chinese were, I believe, famous for such vivid dreams; one of their poets is said to have experienced an entire lifetime of love, fear, and adventure while washing his feet. This was my case exactly. Here was I not a day —nay not an hour—older, and no one knew what had passed in the Antarctic save I myself.

"It was a reasonable explanation, but it had one grave defect, which rendered it totally useless.

"It was false.

"Since that time, monsieur, I have gone on my peculiar voyages, my holidays, *mes vacances,* as I call them, not once but dozens of times. My magic carpet is the railway station at Beaulieu, or to be more precise, the passageway between the ticket office and the café at precisely ten minutes before three in the afternoon. A traversal of the passage at any other time brings me merely to the other side of the station, but a traversal of the passage at this particular time brings me to some far, exotic corner of the globe. Perhaps it is Ceylon with its crowds of variegated hue, its scent of incense, its pagodas and rickshaws. Or the deserts of Al-Iqah, with the crowds of Bedawi, dressed in flowing white and armed with rifles, many of whom whirl round about one another on horseback. Or I will find myself on the languid islands of Tahiti, with the graceful and dusky inhabitants bringing me bowls of *poi* and garlands of flowers whose beauty is unmatched anywhere else in the tropical portion of the globe. Nor have my holidays been entirely confined to the terrestrial regions. Last February I stepped through the passage to find myself on the sands of a primitive beach under a stormy, gray sky; in the distance one could perceive the roarings of saurians and above me were the giant saw-toothed, purple leaves of some palmaceous plant, one (as it turned out) entirely unknown to botanical science.

"No, monsieur, it was not Ceylon; it was Venus. It is true that I prefer a less overcast climate, but still one can hardly complain. To lie in the darkness of the Venerian night, on the silky volcanic sands, under the starry leaves of the *laradh,* while imbibing the million perfumes of the night-blooming flowers and listening to the music of the *karakh*—really, one does not miss the blue sky. Although only a few weeks ago I was in a place that also pleased

me: imagine a huge, whitish-blue sky, a desert with giant mountains on the horizon, and the lean, hard-bitten water-prospectors with their dowsing rods, their high-heeled boots, and their large hats, worn to protect faces already tanned and wrinkled from the intense sunlight.

"No, not Mars, Texas. They are marvelous people, those American pioneers, the men handsome and laconic, the women sturdy and efficient. And then one day I entrained to Lyons only to find myself on a railway platform that resembled a fishbowl made of tinted glass, while around me rose mountains fantastically slender into a black sky where the stars shone like hard marbles, scarcely twinkling at all. I was wearing a glass helmet and clothes that resembled a diver's. I had no idea where I was until I rose, and then to my edified surprise, instead of rising in the usual manner, I positively bounded into the air!

"I was on the Moon.

"Yes, monsieur, the Moon, although some distance in the future, the year two thousand eighty and nine, to be precise. At that date human beings will have established a colony on the Moon. My carriage swiftly shot down beneath one of the Selenic craters to land in their principal city, a fairy palace of slender towers and domes of glass, for they use as building material a glass made from the native silicate gravel. It was on the Moon that I gathered whatever theory I now have concerning my peculiar experiences with the railway passage at Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont, for I made the acquaintance there of the principal mathematician of the twenty-first century, a most elegant lady, and put the problem to her. You must understand that on the Moon *les nègres, les juifs* even *les femmes* may obtain high positions and much influence; it is a true republic. This lady introduced me to her colleague, a black physicist of more-than-normal happenings, or *le paraphysique* as they call it, and the two debated the matter during an entire day (not a Selenic day, of course, since that would have amounted to a time equal to twenty-eight days of our own). They could not agree, but in brief, as they told me, either the railway tunnel at Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont has achieved infinite connectivity or it is haunted. To be perfectly sincere, I regretted leaving the Moon. But one has one's obligations. Just as my magic carpet here at Beaulieu is of the nature of a railway tunnel, and just as I always find myself in *mes vacances* at first situated on a railway platform, thus my return must also be effected by that so poetically

termed road of iron; I placed myself into the railway that connects two of the principal Selenic craters, and behold!—I alight at the platform at Lyons, not a day older.

"Indeed, monsieur" (and here Madame Bertrand coughed delicately) "as we are both people of the world, I may mention that certain other of the biological processes also suspend themselves, a fact not altogether to my liking, since my dear Aloysius and myself are entirely without family. Yet this suspension has its advantages; if I had aged as I have lived, it would be a woman of seventy who speaks to you now. In truth, how can one age in worlds that are, to speak frankly, not quite real? Though perhaps if I had remained permanently in one of these worlds, I too would have begun to age along with the other inhabitants. That would be a pleasure on the Moon, for my mathematical friend was age two hundred when I met her, and her acquaintance, the professor of *le paraphysique,* two hundred and five."

Here Madame Bertrand, to whose recital I had been listening with breathless attention, suddenly ceased speaking. Her lemon ice stood untouched upon the table. So full was I of projects to make the world acquainted with this amazing history that I did not at first notice the change in Madame Bertrand's expression, and so I burst forth:

"The National Institute—the Académie—no, the universities, and the newspapers also—"

But the charming lady, with a look of horror, had risen from the table, crying, "Mon dieu! My train! What will Garance think? What will she say? Monsieur, not a word to anyone!"

Imagine my consternation when Madame Bertrand here precipitously departed from the café and began to cross the station towards that ominous passageway. I could only postulate, "But madame, consider! Ceylon! Texas! Mars!"

"No, it is too late," said she. "Only at the former time in the train schedule. Monsieur, remember, please, not a word to anyone!"

Following her, I cried, "But if you do not return—" and she again favored me with her delightful smile, saying rapidly, "Do not distress yourself, monsieur. By now I have developed certain sensations—a *frisson* of the neck and shoulder blades—which warns me of the condition of the passageway. The later hour is always safe. But my train—!"

And so Madame Bertrand left me. Amazing woman! A traveler

not only to the far regions of the earth but to those of imagination, and yet perfectly respectable, gladly fulfilling the duties of family life, and punctually (except for this one time) meeting her sister-in-law, Mademoiselle Garance Bertrand, on the train platform at Lyons.

Is that the end of my story? No, for I was fated to meet Amélie Bertrand once again.

My business, which I have mentioned to you, took me back to Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont at the end of that same summer. I must confess that I hoped to encounter Madame Bertrand, for I had made it my intention to notify at least several of our great national institutions of the extraordinary powers possessed by the railway passage at Beaulieu, and yet I certainly could not do so without Madame Bertrand's consent. Again it was shortly before three in the afternoon; again the station platform was deserted. I saw a figure which I took to be that of Madame Bertrand seated upon the bench reserved for passengers and hastened to it with a glad cry—

But it was not Amélie Bertrand. Rather it was a thin and elderly female, entirely dressed in the dullest of black and completely without the charm I had expected to find in my fellow passenger. The next moment I heard my name pronounced and was delighted to perceive, issuing from the ticket office, Madame Bertrand herself, wearing a light-colored summer dress.

But where was the gaiety, the charm, the pleasant atmosphere of June? Madame Bertrand's face was closed, her eyes watchful, her expression determined. I would immediately have opened to her my immense projects, but with a shake of her head the lady silenced me, indicating the figure I have already mentioned.

"My sister-in-law, Mademoiselle Garance," she said. I confess that I nervously expected that Aloysius Bertrand himself would now appear. But we were alone on the platform. Madame Bertrand continued: "Garance, this is the gentleman who was the unfortunate cause of my missing my train last June."

Mademoiselle Garance, as if to belie the reputation for loquacity I had heard applied to her earlier in the summer, said nothing, but merely clutched to her meager bosom a small train case.

Madame Bertrand said to me, "I have explained to Garance the occasion of your illness last June and the manner in which the officials of the station detained me. I am glad to see you looking so well."

This was a clear hint that Mademoiselle Garance was to know nothing of her sister-in-law's history; thus I merely bowed and nodded. I wished to have the opportunity of conversing with Madame Bertrand more freely, but I could say nothing in the presence of her sister-in-law. Desperately I began: "You are taking the train today—"

"For the sake of nostalgia," said Madame Bertrand. "After today I shall never set foot in a railway carriage. Garance may if she likes, but I will not. Aeroplanes, motor cars, and ships will be good enough for me. Perhaps like the famous American, Madame Earhart, I shall learn to fly. This morning Aloysius told me the good news: a change in his business arrangements has enabled us to move to Lyons, which we are to do at the end of the month."

"And in the intervening weeks—?" said I.

Madame Bertrand replied composedly, "There will be none. They are tearing down the station."

What a blow! And there sat the old maid, Mademoiselle Garance, entirely unconscious of the impending loss to science! I stammered something—I know not what—but my good angel came to my rescue; with an infinitesimal movement of the fingers, she said:

"Oh, monsieur, my conscious pains me too much! Garance, would you believe that I told this gentleman the most preposterous stories? I actually told him—seriously, now—that the passageway of this train station was the gateway to another world! No, many worlds, and that I had been to all of them. Can you believe it of me?" She turned to me. "Oh, monsieur," she said, "you were a good listener. You only pretended to believe. Surely you cannot imagine that a respectable woman like myself would leave her husband by means of a railway passage which has achieved infinite connectivity?"

Here Madame Bertrand looked at me in a searching manner, but I was at a loss to understand her intention in so doing and said nothing.

She went on, with a little shake of the head. "I must confess it; I am addicted to storytelling. Whenever my dear Aloysius left home on his business trips, he would say to me, *'Occupe-toi, occupe-toi, Amélie!'* and, alas, I have occupied myself only too well. I thought my romance might divert your mind from your ill-health and so presumed to tell you an unlikely tale of extraordinary voyages. Can you forgive me?"

I said something polite, something I do not now recall. I was, you understand, still reeling from the blow. All that merely a fable! Yet with what detail, what plausible circumstance Madame Bertrand had told her story. I could only feel relieved I had not actually written to the National Institute. I was about to press both ladies to take some refreshment with me, when Madame Bertrand (suddenly putting her hand to her heart in a gesture that seemed to me excessive) cried, "Our train!" and turning to me, remarked, "will you accompany us down the passage?"

Something made me hesitate; I know not what.

"Think, monsieur," said Madame Bertrand, with her hand still pressed to her heart, "where will it be this time? A London of the future, perhaps, enclosed against the weather and built entirely of glass? Or perhaps the majestic, high plains of Colorado? Or will we find ourselves in one of the underground cities of the moons of Jupiter, in whose awesome skies the mighty planet rises and sets with a visual diameter more than that of the terrestrial Alps?"

She smiled with humor at Mademoiselle Garance, remarking, "Such are the stories I told this gentleman, dear Garance; they were a veritable novel," and I saw that she was gently teasing her sister-in-law, who naturally did not know what any of this was about.

Mademoiselle Garance ventured to say timidly that she "liked to read novels."

I bowed.

Suddenly I heard the sound of the train outside Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont. Madame Bertrand cried in an utterly prosaic voice, "Our train! Garance, we shall miss our train!" and again she asked, "Monsieur, will you accompany us?"

I bowed, but remained where I was. Accompanied by the thin, stooped figure of her sister-in-law, Madame Bertrand walked quickly down the passageway which divides the ticket room of the Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont station from the tiny café. I confess that when the two ladies reached the mid-point of the longitudinal axis of the passageway, I involuntarily closed my eyes, and when I opened them, the passage was empty.

What moved me then I do not know, but I found myself quickly traversing the passageway, seeing in my mind's eye Madame Bertrand boarding the Lyons train with her sister-in-law, Mademoiselle Garance. One could certainly hear the train; the

sound of its engine filled the whole station. I believe I told myself that I wished to exchange one last polite word. I reached the other side of the station—

And there was no Lyons train there.

There were no ladies on the platform.

There is, indeed, no two-fifty-one train to Lyons whatsoever, not on the schedule of any line!

Imagine my sensations, my dear friend, upon learning that Madame Bertrand's story was true, all of it! It is true, all too true, all of it is true, and my Amélie is gone forever!

"My" Amélie I call her; yet she still belongs (in law) to Aloysius Bertrand, who will, no doubt, after the necessary statutory period of waiting is over, marry again, and thus become a respectable and unwitting bigamist.

That animal could never have understood her!

Even now (if I may be permitted that phrase) Amélie Bertrand may be drifting down one of the great Venerian rivers on a gondola, listening to the music of the *karakh;* even now she may perform acts of heroism on Airstrip One or chat with her mathematical friend on a balcony that overlooks the airy towers and flower-filled plazas of the Selenic capitol. I have no doubt that if you were to attempt to find the places Madame Bertrand mentioned by looking in the Encyclopedia or a similar work of reference, you would not succeed. As she herself mentioned, they are "not quite real." There are strange discrepancies.

Alas, my friend, condole with me; by now all such concern is academic, for the train station at Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont is gone, replaced by a vast erection swarming with workmen, a giant *hangar* (I learned the name from one of them), or edifice for the housing of aeroplanes. I am told that large numbers of these machines will soon fly from *hangar* to *hangar* across the country.

But think: these aeroplanes, will they not in time be used for ordinary business travel, for scheduled visits to resorts and other places? In short, are they not even now the railways of the new age? Is it not possible that the same condition, whether of infinite connectivity or of hauntedness, may again obtain, perhaps in the same place where the journeys of my vanished angel have established a precedent or predisposition?

My friend, collude with me. The *hangar* at Beaulieu will soon be finished, or so I read in the newspapers. I shall go down into
K32 the country and establish myself near this *hangar;* I shall pur-

chase a ticket for a ride in one of the new machines, and then we shall see. Perhaps I will enjoy only a pleasant ascension into the air and a similar descent. Perhaps I will instead feel that *frisson* of the neck and shoulder blades of which Madame Bertrand spoke; well, no matter: my children are grown, my wife has a generous income, the *frisson* will not dismay me. I shall walk down the corridor or passageway in or around the *hangar* at precisely nine minutes before three and into the space between the worlds; I shall again feel the strange retardation of time, I shall feel the heaviness of the body, I shall see the haziness at the other end of the tunnel, and then through the lashing wind, through the mistiness which envelops me, with the rushing and roaring of an invisible aeroplane in my ears, I shall proceed. Madame Bertrand was kind enough to delay her own holiday to conduct me back from Uganda; she was generous enough to offer to share the traversal of the passage with me a second time. Surely such kindness and generosity must have its effect! This third time I will proceed. Away from my profession, my daily newspaper, my chess games, my *digestif*—in short, away from all those habits which, it is understood, are given us to take the place of happiness. Away from the petty annoyances of life I shall proceed, away from a dull old age, away from the confusions and terrors of a Europe grown increasingly turbulent, to—

—*What?*

The above copy of a letter was found in a volume of the Encyclopedia (U–Z) in the Bibliothèque National. *It is believed from the evidence that the writer disappeared at a certain provincial town (called "Beaulieu-sur-le-Pont" in the manuscript) shortly after purchasing a ticket for a flight in an aeroplane at the flying field there, a pastime popular among holiday makers.*

He has never been seen again.

THE 1980 ANNUAL WORLD'S BEST SF